

Without an attempt to break free from the traditional, sometimes mythical gerontological presumptions, it might quite possibly be that we carry out research work and care that, in certain cases, are incompatible with the metatheoretical paradigm that defines reality for aging individuals in the real world. Perhaps we force upon some elderly people a paradigm that they, themselves, no longer inhabit.

Of course, it is not easy to free oneself from the paradigm that one is used to and to change the metatheoretical conditions for the scientific work. Just to discern the borders of the paradigm one is working within can be as difficult as it is for a fish to become conscious of the water in which it swims. Therefore, we cannot claim to be able to offer the new "quantum theory" of gerontology. The theory of gerotranscendence is, however, an attempt to renew some of the traditional ways of thinking while working within the framework of the above principles for breaking theoretical boundaries.

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CHAPTER 2

Origin of the Theory and First Outline²

The theory of gerotranscendence was, as described in the previous chapter, born of the uncomfortable knowledge and insight that not only much of the empirical data didn't match the prevailing theories, but also that certain theoretical attempts had been furiously discarded. Maybe the baby had been thrown out with the bathwater?

When Cumming, Newell, Dean, and McCaffrey (1960) first published their tentative disengagement theory of aging, followed by an elaboration (Cumming & Henry, 1961), the theoretical gerontological discussions turned into something like a riot. The theory assumed an intrinsic tendency to disengage and withdraw when growing old, which was supposed to go hand in hand with the tendency of society to reject aging individuals. The individual was, according to the theory, supposed to gradually cut his/her bonds with society and, to an increasing extent, turn inward. This two-way process was supposed to be, both for the individual and society, inevitable and functional. As a preparation for death, the individual and society were thought to gradually disengage from each other. This disengagement does not, according to the theory, involve dissatisfaction or mental problems on the part of the individual. On the contrary, since disengagement was supposed to be a natural process, it was associated with satisfaction and inner harmony. According to this theory, disengagement is a culture-free concept, but its specific expressions are invariably culture bound.

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In principle, the disengagement theory generated three types of hypotheses. The first hypothesis states that all societies, in one way or the other, push the aging individual away. The second hypothesis states that the individual, motivated by intrinsic forces, disengages from society. This individual disengagement is both social and psychological. Social disengagement refers to the reduction of social interaction and the reduction of social roles and the amount of time spent in each role. Psychological disengagement refers to the reduction of ego involvement, interest, and emotional involvement in other people and society as such and, in its place, a disengaged turning inwards. The third hypothesis assumes that the individual, despite social and psychological disengagement, continues to experience a high degree of life satisfaction, happiness, and contentedness. This third hypothesis also implies indirectly a decrease in satisfaction if the natural process of disengagement is violated and old people are forced into various activities. Thus, the main premise of the activity theory—that activity leads to satisfaction and contentment—was disputed by the disengagement theory.

The disengagement theory not only ran counter to the widely accepted activity theory, but also to the personal values held by many gerontologists, and their wishes for what reality ought to be like—a continuation of their middle-aged, middle-class Western lifestyle. And, additionally, as many gerontologists enter the field of gerontology with a mixed humanistic and scientific approach—having the feeling that old people are treated badly and wanting to study this scientifically—it is not surprising that the theory of disengagement was perceived as threatening and uninviting. From a humanistic point of view, the very word *disengagement* has negative overtones. Consequently, much time and effort were spent during the 1960s and 1970s to refute or modify the theory theoretically and empirically. The author of this book indeed participated in this campaign.

A series of modifying or alternative explanations to the empirically observable pattern of disengagement was offered. The theory in its original raw shape was apparently unacceptable. As the empirical data neither supported, nor totally refuted the theory (which was also the problem with the theory of activity), the theory could be disarmed by modification. Cumming (1963) herself modified the theory by stating that the process of disengagement is not universal but dependent on personality types.

All three hypotheses mentioned above have been the target of research for many gerontologists. Everyone seems to agree with the state-

ment that Western societies reject old people. This agreement is also the only indisputable support for the disengagement theory. The second hypothesis, which states that the individual disengages socially and psychologically, has been dismissed by almost every gerontologist. Most gerontologists, including the author of this book, agreed that individual disengagement was non-existent, and even if some "disengagement behavior" existed, it was dependent on something other than an intrinsic drive to disengage (Desroches & Kaiman, 1964; Videbeck & Knox, 1965; Kapnick, et al., 1968; Palmore, 1968; Thoma, 1969; Tornstam, 1973).

Many gerontologists have been particularly interested in testing the third hypothesis and focusing the causes of life satisfaction and contentment in old age—activity, disengagement, or something else. Lowenthal and Boler (1965) argued, for example, that the lack of sufficient support for the hypothesis that activity leads to well-being and contentment must be understood in terms of *deprivation*. A voluntary reduction of the social network and social engagement differs from an involuntary reduction. Havens (1968), on the other hand, gave prominence to the continuity of life patterns as the cause of life satisfaction and contentment in old age; the important thing is neither activity nor disengagement, but *continuity*. Tissue (1971) presented ideas similar to those of Lowenthal. The cause of dissatisfaction is the discrepancy between the social network the individual has and the one he/she would like to have. Lowenthal and Haven (1968) pointed to the fact that the research usually fails to distinguish between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of social interaction. If we only measure the quantity of social interaction we end up with weak correlations between interaction and satisfaction.

Finally, social gerontology was supplied with a new model which completely reduced the disengagement pattern to social psychology. Kuypers and Bengtson (1973) took their point of departure from a model formulated by Zusman (1966) and introduced the concept of a social breakdown syndrome. Zusman's model described the process by which the individual's social environment interacts with his/her self-perception in the production of a negative spiral—a social breakdown. Kuypers and Bengtson transferred the model to social gerontology and presented at the same time a model of social reconstruction, which described how the negative disengagement pattern could be broken. If some kind of "disengagement behavior" could be observed, it was the result of an externally produced social breakdown spiral, which, by proper means,

could and should be reverted. The original disengagement theory had now been given the coup de grace.

After this, the disengagement theory was referred to almost with disdain. Hardly any gerontologist dared to state anything but that the theory was false. The defeating of the disengagement theory was buoyed by an almost "religious" conviction of its incorrectness. This emotional vindication of the incorrectness of the theory resembles other "isms" (Communism, Protestantism, racism, etc.) where, after some time, devotion to the ism veils the reality. This possibility contributed to a curiosity to take a new look at the theory—with a new metatheoretical perspective—to see if the outcome might throw some light on the aforementioned discrepancies between gerontological theory and empirical findings.

This curiosity was sustained by some indicators suggesting that certain theoretical aspects might have been hidden in the shadow of the disengagement theory. One such "unscientific" indication was a personal conversation with the Polish gerontologist, Jerzy Piotrowski, with whom the author of this book had the pleasure of collaborating during a research period in Warsaw in 1975. While discussing with him the disengagement theory and its countertheories, we were both of the opinion that the disengagement theory was incorrect. Our discussion was renewed at the 11th International Congress of Gerontology in Tokyo in 1978. On this occasion Piotrowski suggested that the disengagement theory perhaps did trail some theoretical strength behind it after all. Maybe we had thrown the baby out with the bath water was Piotrowski's suggestion. When asked what new evidence could be presented to support this opinion, Jerzy stated, "The evidence comes from within myself."

Other indications came from subjective reports of staff members working with old people. On several occasions they reported having very mixed feelings when trying to "activate" certain old people. They maintained that activity is good, but they nevertheless confessed feeling that they were doing something wrong when they tried to drag certain old people to various forms of arranged social activity or activity therapy. They felt as if they were trespassing on something they rather ought to respect and leave alone.

Even other, more "solid" indications, as mentioned earlier, contributed to the suggestion that the disengagement theory perhaps did trail shadow some theoretical strength behind it. In particular, it was at that time, my personal study of experiences of loneliness among Swedish inhabitants age 15 to 80 years (Törnström, 1988) where it was shown,

contrary to general assumptions, that the degree of loneliness decreased with every consecutive age group, despite their role losses and other losses. It was the young respondents, not the old ones, who reported the highest degrees of loneliness. It was also shown that the positive effect of social interaction with other people, as a remedy for loneliness, decreased for every consecutive age group.

THE PARADIGMATIC CONTEXT OF THE DISENGAGEMENT THEORY AND ITS COUNTER-THEORIES

Although the old disengagement theory and its counter theories seem to be very different, they flourish within the same paradigmatic framework. This framework is a rather common positivist one, in which the individual is regarded as an object directed by internal and external forces and the researcher is mainly interested in the behavior of the individual. It is also the researcher who defines the key concepts and what is considered "normal."

Also typical for these kinds of theories is the assumption of a common and shared definition of reality and the existence of general invariances or "laws"—sometimes qualified a bit by, for example, describing how the disengagement process can be slightly different for people with different personalities.

What was missing in order to make both disengagement theory as well as the theory of activity correspond with the empirical reality was the lever of a paradigmatic shift. To illustrate the point and in order to open the mind for doing something similar in gerontological theory, we will use two well-known and clear examples from other fields.

Everybody is familiar with the classic psychological double picture, in which you see either two faces turning toward each other—or a chalice. Depending on one's perspective, one or the other of the pictures appears. What is background in one of the versions becomes foreground in the other. When the observation paradigm is changed in this way, the picture of the reality under observation also changes. In science there are many examples of how the picture of reality was modified when the theoretical paradigm was changed. The classic example of the importance such a change can bring is when the Ptolemaic cosmology was substituted with the Copernican system, as earlier described. When Copernicus suggested that the Earth and the other planets were in orbit around the sun, his

postulate was nothing less than a revolutionary shift of paradigm. Not only the picture of the cosmic system but all scientific theories were changed by this shift.

In a much more modest way, such a paradigmatic shift is necessary for a new theoretical understanding of aging. A few gerontologists have in fact approached such a shift. Hochschild (1976), for example, argued that the patterns of "engagement" or "disengagement" must be phenomenologically understood. What is lacking when it concerns the disengagement pattern is an understanding of the meaning the individual imparts to "engagement" or "disengagement"—not the meaning the gerontologist attributes to it.

Gutman (1976) did, in fact, move towards such a phenomenological description of the "disengagement pattern." In a cross-cultural study of Americans, Navajo Indians, low- and highland Maya Indians, and Druzes, TAT-tests of young and old men were compared. The TAT is a projective test, where ambiguous drawings are shown, and the tested person asked to tell what is going on in the drawing. When telling this, the person projects his or hers own values, expectations, and definitions of reality into the picture.

Gutman found a common pattern in all societies: young men demonstrated what was called *active mastery* in their projections of the TAT-pictures, while the old men demonstrated *passive mastery* or *magical mastery*. For example, young men projected more competitiveness and aggressiveness into the pictures, while old men projected more solidarity, understanding, and harmony.

At the same time as Gutman observed this cross-cultural tendency toward passive mastery and magical mastery in old men, he also observed that this tendency was socially anchored among the Druze, but not among Americans. In the Druze culture the tendency toward passive mastery and magical mastery were found to be connected with leadership, activity, and engagement. In America the same tendencies were connected with social inactivity. In conclusion Gutman summarized:

... it is the movement toward passive and magical mastery that appears to be universal, not the movement toward disengagement.

Gutman was moving toward a paradigmatic shift but ultimately stopped himself by creating a dichotomy between disengagement and the universal tendencies of passive and magical mastery. His perspective

remained traditional, since the behavior of the individual also was interpreted as a functional instrument for mastering a new situation. The behavior was seen as a coping strategy—not as a developmental qualitative difference in how young and old men define reality. To reach a new understanding we have to switch to quite another kind of metatheoretical paradigm.

EXPERIMENTAL THINKING WITH AN ALTERNATE METATHEORETICAL PARADIGM

To find way to a new meta-theoretical paradigm we shall leave the ordinary positivist way of thinking and instead, as an intellectual experiment, turn to the exotic and strange frame of reference offered by Eastern philosophy. We are going to contrast our understanding of the world with what a Zen Buddhist would probably have. This does not in any way mean the advocating of Zen Buddhism as misunderstood by some (e.g., Jönsson & Magnusson, 2001). It is just an example of turning our ordinary way of thinking upside down in order to get a new view of things—a technique suggested earlier in this book. So, the following is experimental thinking, based on guesses of how Zen Buddhists possibly might construct their world.

The Zen Buddhist probably lives within a cosmic world paradigm where many boundaries are diffuse and permeable. He probably looks upon Westerners as limited and trapped in an obsessive, materialistic pattern. When we, with our metatheoretical perspective, observe the Zen Buddhist lost in meditation, it is not unlikely that we end up labeling him as "disengaged." We would almost certainly do so if we did not know that he was a Zen Buddhist.

According to the metaperspective held by Zen Buddhists, however, it is not at all a matter of disengagement. The Zen Buddhist lives in a world that is defined differently from ours. In this world much of the difference between subject and object is erased. The statements made by a Zen Buddhist are often difficult to understand from the point of view of our metatheoretical paradigm—for example, that you and I not are separate objects but parts of the same entirety. Past, present, and future are not separate but exist simultaneously.

It should be mentioned that this way of thinking is not totally foreign to Western philosophy—even if it has been virtually nonexistent within gerontology. In his theories of psychology, C. G. Jung (1953) described

the *collective unconscious*, referring to the fact that in our minds we have inherited predispositions that are reflections of the experiences of earlier generations. The collective unconscious embraces structures and predispositions that unify both generations and individuals. There are no boundaries between individuals, generations, or places. Some of Jung's followers believe that you can get in touch with this collective unconscious through meditation. Much of the initial train of thought regarding gerotranscendence did, in fact, arise from an early lecture of Jung (1930), where he stated that the meaning and the tasks of old age are quite different from the meaning and the tasks of mid-life. In the first part of life the task is getting acquainted with and socialized to society, whereas the task in old age is getting acquainted with yourself and with the collective unconscious. Much of this can be understood as a transcendental change in the definitions of reality. In modern language a de- and re-construction of the reality—much in line with what might be regarded as strange and odd with a Zen Buddhist. In his 1930 lecture Jung also stated that is a tragedy in our part of the world that the developmental tasks of the second half of life seem unknown to most people. We lead our lives with the erroneous apprehension that continuing with the tasks of the first half of life is all there is. As a consequence many of us meet our death as only half-developed individuals, exhibiting signs of depression, despair, fear of death, and disgust with ourselves and others, together with a feeling that life has been uncompleted or wasted. Jung's lecture implies that other (non-Western) cultures might be better aware of the special developmental tasks of the second half of life.

At any rate, here we can find a link between Eastern and Western philosophy. Erich Fromm (1960) points to other links between Western psychiatry and Zen Buddhism. We mention this since venturing into a foreign, strange metaworld might feel safer if we can hold hands with a couple of well-known Western philosophers.

However, the Zen Buddhist would probably never agree to being labeled as "disengaged." Rather, he would call himself *transcendent* in the sense that he lives in another, more boundary-free world compared with most of us from Western societies. His engagement is substantial, but according to a definition other than ours. That is why we might reach the conclusion that before our very eyes we have an individual who is ignorant of the world and disengaged.

Now, let us suppose that, without thinking about it, we become more and more like the Zen Buddhist, figuratively speaking, when we age.

Suppose that, without knowing anything about Zen Buddhism or transcendence, we reach a certain degree of transcendence. Some of us might even reach a high degree of transcendence—entering a new metaworld with new definitions of reality. These definitions might seem to be much less restricted than the "normal" definitions held by social gerontologists. Then we would end up with a remarkable situation in which researchers with one paradigm try to study individuals who are living according to another one—just as if Ptolemy, working from his paradigm, should try to describe and interpret the theories of Copernicus.

Let's suggest that aging, or rather living, implies a process during which the degree of transcendence increases from young adulthood and on. If looking at the full age range we might even find a U-shaped correlation with age. As small children we live in a world with a higher degree of transcendence, where the borders between you and me, now and then, fantasy and reality, are permeable. Gradually these borders are established according to the rules and definitions given by our culture. Later on, in young adulthood, these borders again become permeable and the degree of transcendence increases. The kind of transcendence we experience as small children could be termed *paedotranscendence* as distinguished from the *gerotranscendence* we can reach in old age. This, however, in no way implies that gerotranscendence means returning to childhood. Instead, we suggest that the condition of gerotranscendence is reached by a process where all the experiences in earlier life are included. Therefore, at the same time we suggest that the process towards gerotranscendence is generated by normal living. Let's also suggest that this process is intrinsic and culture free, but modified by specific cultural patterns.

In principle, it might be assumed that the process towards gerotranscendence, after young adulthood, is a life-long and continuous one. In practice, however, this process might be both obstructed and accelerated. The process toward gerotranscendence might, for example, be accelerated by a life crisis, after which the individual totally restructures his/her metaworld instead of resigning him/herself to the former one. This accelerated restructuring of the metaworld has been described in many cases of young individuals facing death as a result of a fatal disease. It should be emphasized that, in our interpretation, this is not the same as a defense mechanism, which always functions within the former metaworld. As we see it, both the classic defense mechanisms and the processes of coping take place within a given metatheoretical framework, whereas gerotranscendence refers to a shift away from this framework.

It is presumed that the process toward gerotranscendence also can be impeded. It is most probable that certain elements in our culture, for example, hinder this process. Social gerontologists themselves might contribute to its obstruction. We shall return to this question later. If we, however, accept the idea that the process towards gerotranscendence can be both obstructed and accelerated, we will as a consequence find many different degrees of gerotranscendence in old people. Not everyone will automatically reach a high degree of gerotranscendence. It is rather expected to be a process, which, at very best, culminates in a new gerotranscendent perspective.

The idea of a life process which optimally ends with gerotranscendence recalls the developmental model formulated by Erik H. Erikson (1950, 1982). According to this model the individual develops through seven stages and, if all goes well, ends up in an eighth stage, which Erikson calls *ego-integrity*. At this stage the individual reaches a fundamental acceptance of his/her own life—regardless of how good or bad it has been. The individual looks back and feels satisfied with the past. Erikson's eighth stage and what is referred to as the stage of gerotranscendence differ on this point. In their interviews with Gutman (1976) the old Druze males, who by our terms had reached the stage of gerotranscendence, did not look back on their past lives with pure satisfaction. Rather, they considered themselves as ignorant when they lived in the former metaworld and were reluctant to look back at this immature period in life with proud satisfaction only.

According to Erikson's theory, if the individual does not reach the eighth stage of ego-integrity, he/she experiences despair and fear of death. The positive personality characteristic during this eighth stage is wisdom, while its negative opposite is disgust and contempt. The individual who reaches this eighth stage also recognizes ego-integrity in others who have come to the same destination. Erikson is, however, rather vague when describing what the wisdom in this eighth stage really constitutes. It may be that Erikson, as do others who talk vaguely about wisdom, intuitively have come close to what here is referred to as gerotranscendence—without understanding the metatheoretical shift of paradigm that is necessary in order to reach a new comprehension, as suggested by the experimental thinking on gerotranscendence.

With the intellectual input from Eastern philosophy and the above discussion, a basic metatheoretical suggestion can now be formulated: The enlightened maturity which, at very best, accompanies the process

of aging, or rather the process of living, might be described as a shift in metaperspective—from a materialistic and rational perspective to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally followed by an increase in life satisfaction.

The development towards gerotranscendence might, as a preliminary suggestion, include the following:

- an increasing feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe
- a redefinition of the perception of time, space, and objects
- a redefinition of the perception of life and death and a decrease in the fear of death
- an increased feeling of affinity with past and coming generations
- a decrease in interest in superfluous social interaction
- a decrease in interest in material things
- a decrease in self-centeredness
- an increase in time spent in "meditation"

The increasing feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe might be experienced as being a part of a flow of energy which is coursing through the universe. Likewise, the perception of time might come to change from our normal linear view. Not only the perception of the velocity of time, but also that of the past, present, and future can be expected to change. In fact, our normal perception of time is only one of several possibilities as postulated by the theories of Einstein and Bohr, who punctured the notion of linearity as the only way to understand time.

The change in the perception of objects might include an elimination of the boundaries between "you" and "me" and between "us" and "them." An impression of being "one" might perhaps appear instead. As a consequence, the degree of self-centeredness would probably diminish. To a certain extent the enclosed self may become disaggregated and substituted with a cosmic self. Individuals might no longer look upon themselves as especially important. Maybe they perceive themselves as part of a cosmic flow of energy, in which the flow of energy, and not its individual parts, is the important thing. This might also involve a redefinition of the perception of life and death. It is not individual life but rather the total

flow of life that is important. With such changes in the definitions of the metaworld it would be understandable that the fear of death would decrease and that the feeling of affinity with past, present, and coming generations would increase.

With the above assumed changes in the definitions of the world, it is easy to predict a decreasing interest in superfluous social relations and material goods. The individual who has experienced these changes may look with pity on many younger people who are obsessed with social engagements. Instead, time might be spent on what is more important, e.g., meditation and philosophizing. This does not necessarily imply a social withdrawal, although that may prove to be the case in our society, as suggested by Gutman (1976), since few roles conforming to gerotranscendence are provided and no guidance for entering the later part of life is given.

It is interesting how Chinen (1985, 1986), in an analysis of fairy tales which include older protagonists, found that the central motif in these tales is transcendence. Chinen proposed that the fairy tales represent guidelines for the developmental sequence of old age and identified processes of religious, social, and psychological transcendence. After reviewing over 2500 fairy tales, Chinen found that very few from Western societies had an older protagonist. Instead, the Western fairy tales predominantly featured young protagonists. In Eastern and some Slavic countries there seem to be normative fairy tales supporting the process towards gerotranscendence, while in the Western countries no such phenomenon can be observed. Drawing on this finding, we suggest that the stress on youth in the Western fairy tales, as well as in society as such, may obstruct the process towards gerotranscendence—simply by overshadowing the developmental tasks of old age. The existence of such tasks becomes invisible.

Chinen (1989a) also provided an example of how the new insights of old age can be achieved, under favorable circumstances, through a gradual process of change. Chinen analyzed the changing attitudes towards their science of two outstanding scientists, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Alfred North Whitehead, both still active and respected scientists and philosophers in their old age. Both of them changed their view of science from a rather rigid and self-assured positivism in their younger years, to a more pragmatic attitude in mid-life, and finally to a transcendent outlook in their old age. In their younger years, they were sure about things and convinced that, given sufficient research, everything could be

given scientific explanation. In mid-life, they began to accept the thought that possibly everything may not be explainable in scientific terms. And, in their old age, both evidenced a radical transcendence of the borderlines between scientific disciplines as well as an acceptance of nonscientific explanations. To Chinen's observation it could be added that there are other examples of well known scientists who have developed in a similar way, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Albert Einstein, and Niels Bohr, to name a few.

The personal development of these "atypical" scientists is mentioned as an example of how personality and perception of the world undergo changes, under favorable circumstances, in individuals who, to a great extent, have been able to go their own way without being hampered by others. Chinen (1989a) holds that this development is seen in individuals who either are given the chance or have within them the power to develop freely. Many of us, however, meet obstacles to such a free development.

OBSTRUCTIONS IN THE PROCESS TOWARDS GEROTRASCENDENCE

In Western culture we might possibly be at risk of being regarded as odd, asocial, mentally disturbed or even disengaged if we change our perceptions of the world in accordance with a gerotranscendental development. In most Western cultures there are no roles or arenas where such a view of reality fits. In the Druze world, however, as described by Gutman (1976), there were roles and arenas available within, for example, religion and religious ceremonies provided a social arena for the wise chiefs and shamans.

Everyone in Western culture "knows" that it is activity, productivity, efficiency, individuality, independency, wealth, health, sociability, and a "realistic" view of the world that counts. By considering this as "fact," we are making a moral and normative judgment. As a result, we may impede the process towards gerotranscendence by making the individual feel guilty about his/her developmental change away from parts of this. Supported by interactionist gerontologists, staff members and relatives of old people may obstruct a natural process towards gerotranscendence. The attitude is that old people who are "turning inwards" or "withdrawing" to something we do not understand, must be reactivated. Inevitably, even old people participate in this obstruction as they, like everyone else,

recognize that it is mid-life activity, productiveness, and social commitments that count in our society. We should therefore not be surprised to find old people who feel guilt in connection with their own development toward gerotranscendence; they may even apologize for having reached a different view of life and living.

One hypothesis is that, paradoxically, obstruction of the gerotranscendental process may possibly precipitate a real syndrome of social breakdown. Hindered in their own personal development, and assaulted by feelings of guilt, individuals may regress to a former developmental stage and undergo a syndrome of social breakdown. This is very much in line with Jung's sad observation that lots of people in our society grow old and unknowing of the special developmental tasks of later life, and thereby come to develop depression, despair, fear of death, disgust with themselves and others, together with the feeling that life has been wasted.

The works of several of the scholars quoted above (Jung, Hochschild, Gutman, Erikson, Chinen) point in a vague way towards a developmental process which, by and large, has been neglected by gerontologists. Other indirect evidence for the claim that gerotranscendence is part of a normal process is suggested by Peck (1956, 1968). In a study of approximately one thousand businessmen he focused on developmental crises during middle and old age.

Peck's description of how these subjects deal with aging implies a right or good way in the sense that this way seemed connected with more happiness and life satisfaction in old age. In line with Erikson (1950) he pointed to a number of developmental crises that may result in either a positive constructive outcome or a negative one. He did not, however, say much about the general developmental process behind the different ways of handling the crises in the second half of life.

According to Peck, the following crises occur in the second half of life:

1. *Ego differentiation or job preoccupation.* Some people seem to be able to reorient their lives in such a way that their identity is no longer dependent on the previous work role. Many other things replace the importance the job had earlier in relation to the perception of the self. Others seem unable to let go of their earlier work career. Ego differentiation is regarded by Peck as the natural and good solution to this developmental crisis, but something prevents certain people from reaching this stage.

2. *Body transcendence or body preoccupation.* Some people become increasingly preoccupied with their bodies in the second half of life. They

are attuned to every little new ailment and make it a major problem in life. Others seem to transcend the body in the sense that they know all about their physical condition and take proper care, but are not focused on it as if it were the hub of universe. Peck indirectly states that body transcendence is the natural development, which for some reason is thwarted for many people.

3. *Ego transcendence or ego preoccupation.* In the same way as the body, the ego should be transcendent in old age. Peck claims that the knowledge of one's own aging and the inevitability of death should prompt a reorganization of the ego, causing the elderly to live in a more generous, unselfish way. This should induce an acceptance of death. For various reasons, many people seem unable to reach such a stage. Instead they develop the type of ego preoccupation and fear of death described by Erikson as despair.

When Peck (1956) uses the term *transcendence* he means something like "overcoming" pains of the body or fear of death and the future, an adaptation to or coping with a deteriorating life situation. Our interpretation is, again, that what Peck actually found were aspects of the general process towards gerotranscendence, which in our society is obstructed by our value patterns and notions of how life in old age should be. We suggest that the "good choices" cited above are reflections of a successful gerotranscendental process. Behind the bad choices are obstructions in the process of gerotranscendence.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have suggested that human nature—the very process of living—encompasses a general tendency toward gerotranscendence, which is, in principle, universal and culture free. To reach gerotranscendence might be to reach wisdom. Our hypothesis is that the process toward gerotranscendence is continuous, but can be either accelerated or obstructed. If all goes well, we will reach the final stage of gerotranscendence, but much in our society impedes the process. In Western societies the process toward gerotranscendence might often be accompanied by guilt. It may be that social gerontologists contribute to such an obstruction, for example, by misinterpreting gerotranscendence as negative disengagement. From our perspective, however, gerotranscendence is never negative. It could instead be the highest level of human development and,

as such, supremely positive. Of course this statement contains a normative component—an idea of what natural and good personal development should be like. In this respect our theory is no different from others, for example, the theory of activity or Erikson's developmental theory. But, it is different, and it offers a new understanding of aging.

Different and seemingly conflicting theories can very well be valid at the same time. It is, for example, true that light can be described both as "particles" and as "waves." Both these perceptions of light are true, based on different scientific paradigms. In the same way, the suggested theory of gerotranscendence can be true at the same time as the activity theory. The latter is true within its own metatheoretical paradigm. In other words, we do not deny the applicability of other theories. They are valid and applicable to individuals who have the same view of life as the theories. They are, however, less applicable to individuals who have moved on to a new comprehension of life—a new metaworld.

This leads us to a major challenge for future empirical and practical gerontology—how to decide whether an individual is demonstrating a negative withdrawal within the mid-life metaworld, or is in the process of transforming this metaworld into a new one, in the process toward gerotranscendence. The very first and most important step is, of course, to recognize if there is something called gerotranscendence. The next step is to discover its characteristics.

As in Jung's theory of the individuation process, gerotranscendence is regarded as a possible final stage in a natural progression towards maturation and wisdom. It defines a reality somewhat different from the "normal," mid-life reality which we often tend to project on old age. Even if Bernice Neugarten and colleagues (1964) early on wrote about the contemplative nature of the inner lives of old people and Clark and Anderson (1967) described how older people turn away from the competitive values of mid-life, many theories have, as earlier described, been based on the assumption that "good aging" equals continuity and preserving mid-life ideals, activities, and definitions of reality. The theory of gerotranscendence takes a perspective that emphasizes change and development.

The term *gerotranscendence* has been chosen because many of the related changes, crises, or developmental characteristics described by others involve various ways in which elderly people break through old boundaries or transcend developmental crises when moving on to a new stage

in life. Thus, in this context, the word *transcendence* is used in this simple sense, not in the religious or metaphysical sense.

This chapter has reviewed the beginning of the theory of gerotranscendence. The following chapters report on the search for empirical evidence and elucidation.

a collaborating psychologist. So, this was a self-selected group of people who, not only from the very beginning felt attracted by the ideas of a personal development continuing into old age, but also recognized such a development in themselves, and were willing to be interviewed about it. The interviews, carried out in 1991, were semistructured, i.e., some theoretically generated themes were discussed but the conversations had an open format. For each theme, the goal was for the interviewer to guide the conversation as little as possible.

The interviews, lasting from one to three hours, were tape-recorded and transcribed, i.e., they were listened to several times, and their essential parts were identified and written down. The resulting 1,250 pages of text constitutes the empirical basis for the present analysis.

Each interview began with an open theme where the respondent simply was asked to tell about changes in attitudes and perspectives during life. Had anything changed since mid-life, and in such case what had changed? This was followed by specific themes generated by the preliminary theory outline. The analysis as well as the following presentation are organized in terms of some major categories obtained during the open-theme interviews. The open theme generated three main dimensions of gerotranscendental change: 1) the *cosmic dimension*, 2) the *self dimension*, and 3) the *dimension of social and personal relations*.

It is interesting to note that Achenbaum and Orwoll (1991) have reached similar dimensions in a psychogerontological analysis of *The Book of Job*. Job's struggle towards wisdom is described as developmental changes in the *transpersonal*, *intrapersonal*, and *interpersonal* dimensions. This is a coincidence that came to our knowledge when the main dimensions of gerotranscendence were already established.

GEROTRASCENDENCE AND ITS OPPOSITE

Among the 50 respondents, some two or three, as exceptions, came to the lecture and agreed to be interviewed, not because they had experienced any development towards gerotranscendence, but because they felt that the developmental idea was interesting even if they could not identify any such change in themselves. Thus, the present material offers the possibility to demonstrate the qualitative content of gerotranscendence by comparing a gerotranscendent and a nongerotranscendent individual. In the following, then, a contrast is made between a respondent who

CHAPTER 3

The Qualitative Content of Gerotranscendence³

It was stated earlier in this book that we need to reach a phenomenological understanding of aging from the individual's inner perspective, rather than it being observed, defined and understood from the perspective of the scholar. It is the aging individual's subjective meanings attached to activities, values, goals in life, and understanding of aging that we need if gerontological theorizing is going to be renewed. This chapter reports on such a phenomenological and qualitative step on the road towards the theory of gerotranscendence.

The outcome is based on in-depth interviews with 50 people recruited after a lecture on some early tentative ideas about the theory—basically corresponding to the content of the previous chapter in this book. After a newspaper interview with the author of this book about the ideas behind the theory a lecture announced in the newspaper article attracted no less than 500 people, most of them in the second half of life, but also a handful of younger ones.

After the lecture the question was asked if there was someone in the audience who might recognize something of the ideas presented in their own personal development, and if they were willing to be interviewed about their developmental experiences. The 50 people who volunteered, between 52 and 97 years of age, were interviewed some months later by

³This chapter builds, with permission, in part on what previously was published in Tornstam, L., 1997a, Gerotranscendence: The Contemplative Dimension of Aging, *Journal of Aging Studies*, 11.2:143–154; Tornstam, L., 1996a, Gerotranscendence—a theory about maturing into old age, *Journal of Aging and Identity*, 1:37–50, and Tornstam, L., 1999b, Late-Life Transcendence: A New Developmental Perspective on Aging, in Thomas, L. E., Eisenhandler, S. A., eds., *Religion, Belief, and Spirituality in Late Life*, New York: Springer.

seemed to have developed a lot even during late life, and a respondent who seemed to be trapped in the definitions of the first half of life.

Eva—Who Has Come a Long Way Towards Gerotranscendence

Eva, formerly a nurse, was 69 years old at the time of the interview. Though not from a poor family, she had a difficult childhood; her upbringing was strict and brutal. She was married and has three adult children. She experienced a deep crisis in connection with her divorce a number of years ago. She said about that:

I don't think a person should ask for crises, but I think that we learn something from the crises we go through.

In answering the open question about whether she has changed her attitude towards life and herself, she described a rather radical change in perspective:

Using an analogy, earlier I used to feel that I was out on a river being carried away by the stream without being able to control it. Even if I wanted to go ashore I couldn't control it; I was carried away both from pleasant and unpleasant things. But today I feel like the river. I feel like I'm the river. I feel that I'm part of the flow that contains both the pleasant and the unpleasant things.

In contrast to the earlier experience of being a powerless object thrown back and forth in "the river of life," Eva now perceives herself as a part of the flow of life itself. The boundary between herself as an object and the universal life has been transcended. Eva came back to this type of change several times during the interview. Now she feels that she "participates in a wider circle, in humanity."

Her perception of time has also changed. Eva now sees time as circular rather than linear. She realizes now that she, in fact, has always lived in a circular time frame without understanding it. According to Eva, this is particularly true of women:

I mean, she gives birth after 9 months, she has her monthly periods, she hangs out her wardrobe in the spring and brings it in the fall, and so on. There are a lot of examples of circularity in women's lives.

Eva's circular time also implies that "one always lives with the past and the future" as she put it. One lives in different times simultaneously. In other words, Eva has transcended the boundary that we normally draw between past, present, and future. She also has strong links with her ancestors, "because I [literally] live very much in the time of my ancestors' generations, too." About her feeling of kinship with earlier generations she said:

That's immortality. The genetic chain that coils.

In this coiling genetic chain, Eva sees a form of eternal life. It is only natural that she does not fear death:

No, it's quite a natural part of life.

In her formulation of "immortality in the coiling genetic chain," Eva in a way combines science and faith (or mysticism), a unification of scientific genetics and the immortality of mysticism and faith. The boundary between science and mysticism is transcended. Eva pointed out that she is not at all religious. Nevertheless, she has come to accept science and faith as equal:

Some people stick with a natural science theory and other people stick with a religious theory. One theory is just as good the other. Some things are unanswered.

With this complete change in her attitude towards life, Eva has also noticed that the sources of joy in life have changed:

Well, earlier it may have been things like a visit to the theater, a dinner, a trip. I wanted certain things to happen that I was a little excited about. . . . My best times [now are] when I sit on the kitchen porch and simply exist, the swallows flying above my head like arrows. Or a spring day like this when I can go to my nettle patch and pick nettles for soup.

It is not only the definitions of "the cosmic dimension" that have changed for Eva. Her perception of who she is and wants to be has also changed. She has discovered sides of herself that she is now trying to change:

. . . I wanted to keep things to myself. I wanted my inner space, my integrity. I used to think that integrity depended on keeping as much

as possible secret, on not giving yourself away. Also in my relationship to my husband I thought I wanted something that was my own. I think that has changed a lot. Feeling that my integrity doesn't depend on that. It would have helped my marriage a lot if I'd realized that earlier.

Opening up her enclosed self to the outer world, Eva has achieved an ability to watch herself from the outside. Describing her change she said about her old self that:

I couldn't see myself from the outside.

Now watching her old self from the outside she can see a good deal of self-infatuation:

It was all narcissism. I remember as a girl, lying on the beach touching myself, touching and kissing my skin. Playing with a friend's hair. I mean, it was all narcissism. This has changed a lot. I'm not the slightest bit worried about my belly or bad skin or the wrinkles in my face. It means nothing to me, nothing at all.

In this statement, Eva not only demonstrates her new insights into herself, but also that she has transcended conventions about the body. She does not deny that her body is changing. It does not scare her. She has no need to separate body and mind in the way that many aging people do, i.e., to look at the aging body with disgust, claiming the exchangeability of the mind or the self. Separating body and mind has almost become the norm for the aging human being as well as for the gerontologist. In her book *The Ageless self*, Kaufman (1986) has introduced this separation between body and mind as part of the normal aging process. The self does not age, only the body. In this perspective, then, Eva's aging is not "normal." For Eva, changes occur in both body and mind. There is a self-developing in an aging body. Eva not only accepts, but enjoys, this development. Neither does she participate in the masquerade, as suggested by Biggs (2003, 2004), where masking the aging body with clothing, cosmetics, or surgery becomes part of a coping strategy to maintain identity.

Also in relation to other people, Eva has become a different person. She is more open to other people today. At the same time, she has become more restrictive in her choice of friends and company. She has abandoned the big circle of friends:

... I think it's more fun to ... I go to an older woman that I know, sit and talk to her. I get much more out of this than going to parties and being with a lot of people where you really don't talk so much with people.

Being with a lot of people used to involve a good deal of make believe and disguise which Eva has now abandoned:

I somehow walked around and played "the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie,"⁴ and I did it well. ... I adjusted a great deal to the roles people expected me to play. I have been a very well-behaved little middle-class girl, but I'm not anymore.

Having the courage to be herself, Eva today dares to say and do things that she did not dare to earlier out of fear of breaking the rules and embarrassing herself:

I'm old enough and wise enough to dare to do dumb things.

However, when asked if it has become easier with age to make wise decisions and give good advice to other people, Eva answered:

Well, it's easier to make both dumb and wise decisions, but there is one thing that I find easier today. That is to refrain from giving good advice.

For Eva, the previously clear difference between good and bad advice has been transcended. Eva thinks that deciding what is good and what is bad is not as easy as it previously seemed to be, particularly where other people are concerned. Eva is happy and satisfied with her life today. She radiates satisfaction with life.

Greta—Who Seems to be Stuck in Her Development

A person who does not radiate any real satisfaction with life is Greta. Greta is a former schoolteacher, 72 years of age at the time of the interview. She grew up in a quiet and safe middle-class environment, but her mother died when she was only 13 years old. Greta has been a widow for several years and has two adult sons. She also had a daughter, but the girl died

⁴Alluding to Luis Buñuel's movie, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972).

at 15 years of age. Her husband, who was very domineering, died when the children were in their first school years.

Thus, like Eva, Greta has gone through difficulties in her life, but she does not seem to have been able to turn them into something positive. Instead, the crises in her life have been compounded. Answering the open question about whether she may have changed her attitude towards life and herself, she just told about how meaningless life became after she retired:

I thought that as a senior citizen I would be active, have adventures, but this just hasn't happened. It's like my feet have been knocked out from under me. I'm surprised that I gave up that easily. I quickly fell into a life as a senior that is rather pointless for me. . . . I miss my work a lot. I miss the satisfaction of working.

Greta has not experienced any considerable changes in perspective when it comes to her perception of herself and the surrounding world. Rather, she seems to cling firmly to middle-age ideals and definitions of reality. She evaluates herself within these frames of reference and arrives at discouraging conclusions:

When I watch myself it's mostly disappointing. Now I'm rather disinterested, unfortunately. I feel that I've used up my supply of . . . I'm afraid I have used up my supply of interest in other people and things like that.

As Greta told her story, it sounded as if she had given up. Her interests and perspectives had not changed very much, they had just ceased. About her relationships to other people, Greta said:

I've had an enormous social network but it's also . . . I think I have . . . I'm not interested anymore. Disengaged and disinterested.

Perhaps the cause of her disinterest is that she is still stuck in the patterns of middle-age. Measured in terms of middle-age performance ideals, neither Greta herself nor other senior citizens are worth much. Greta was to the point when she said:

I'm not fond of seniors but, of course, I don't need to be.

It is evident that Greta includes herself in the category of people that she does not like. Greta is not satisfied with her life.

The comparison between Eva and Greta might lead to the conclusion that Eva has succeeded, in the terminology of Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (1986), in attaining ego integrity in the face of despair, while Greta has not. But, there is more to it. Instead of just attaining a balance between ego integrity and despair, Eva transcends such opposites.

For example, Eva's whole perspective has changed from floating powerlessly in the river of life to being the river itself. She is not just balancing the possible despair of being even more powerless in old age, she transcends it. Eva has also transcended the conventional way of perceiving her body. She has no need to separate body and mind. Again, this means more than just balancing or coping with an ageless self in an aging body. Instead, she transcends the duality.

THE COSMIC DIMENSION OF GEROTRASCENDENCE

Time and Childhood

Earlier we saw that Eva had changed her definition of time. The change in the concept of time is one of the dimensions subsumed under the heading "the cosmic dimension." The interviewer introduced the time concept theme in the following way:

Some people say that they have gradually come to a concept of time that is different from the one they had before. They say that, in early life and adulthood, they had a very clear idea of what is today and what belongs to yesterday, but that it has changed and they feel like they are able to be in two time periods at once. Their past may be present so strongly that they almost live in it, at the same time as they live in the present. Is this something that you recognize?

A few of the respondents answered "yes" to the specific question, but the majority slid over to reports on how childhood has come more alive in their older days.

The fact that people, irrespective of any transcendence of time, begin to think more about childhood experiences and places is well illustrated by the 86-year-old woman who said:

You go back to childhood almost daily. It comes without reflection. I talked to a good friend about this . . . We both go back to the town where we grew up [in our thoughts] . . . Childhood means much more than one thinks, I go back to it all the time.

A 79-year-old woman expressed a similar view saying that it both pleases and scares her: "Now I'm almost 80 and now I dare to remember my childhood." She added:

The older you get, the more you remember of your childhood. There's a dangerous trap in this. I have heard about that all my life.

Thus, when she realized that recalling the experiences of childhood was beginning to mean a lot to her, she became frightened. She interpreted it as a negative sign of her own aging. She had not come up with this negative interpretation herself. She said: "I have heard about that all my life." Thus, the pleasure that this woman finds in recalling her childhood is offset by the negative interpretation of returning to childhood that she has internalized.

The Connection to Earlier Generations

The descriptions of transcendence of the time dimension and the importance of childhood in several cases drifted over to another theme, namely the relation to earlier generations of people. A 72-year-old man describes how the distance to the 17th century has decreased:

If we take the 17th century, it used to be (earlier, in my younger years) tremendously distant, but today I don't think that the 17th century is all that far away. It is somehow as if it has come nearer. And everything in history has come nearer.

A 65-year-old woman, during the conversation about time and childhood, told of an experience of kinship with earlier generations:

... I particularly remember one night, I looked out and saw the moon ... suddenly I got the thought that it was the same moon and the same sun that the Greek philosophers describe, it was just as if ... you know, such a strange feeling that ... I can't explain ... a feeling of kinship ... yes, that's it.

We also recall that Eva perceived "the coiling genetic chain" as her immortality. In both these cases, the feeling of kinship and affinity with earlier generations has been expressed in more general terms. In one case as a general kinship with previously living people, in the other case as a definition of immortality.

In the interview the interviewer introduced the theme in a way that more directly related to the respondents' own ancestors:

Some people say that, during the course of life, they experienced a change in how they feel in relation to their ancestors. It's a kind of increasing kinship with those who lived earlier, a feeling that you are a link in the chain of generations. Have you experienced this?

This theme provoked many reactions in the respondents. The most prominent was the many reports about the wakening interest in genealogy. Several respondents had begun to seek their roots in this tangible manner.

When describing their feelings of increased kinship with earlier generations, respondents used expressions or metaphors showing that the kinship with ancestors has a very strong appeal. "It's the desire under the elms, you know," said a 65-year-old woman referring to an old movie classic.⁵ "Yes, yes, it is almost a religious feeling," said a 71-year-old man.

Life and Death

The theme concerning life and death was introduced in the following way:

Some people experience changes during life in relation to the questions of life and death. Somebody who has feared death in his or her youth can get rid of the fear later in life. Others have always feared death. How do you feel about this?

There were various types of reactions to this question, but the common denominator was that the respondents did not, in general, fear death. They may fear dying, that it will be extended and painful, but not being dead. Some have had this feeling all their lives while others have achieved it later in life.

A 58-year-old man formulated an attitude that comes back in several interviews:

... much of life may be preparation for dying. It is in the character of maturation. I think it comes completely by itself. I don't live in order to die, I want to live. But implicit in maturation is a greater and greater capacity for dying. Some kind of preparation. I think that eventually one dies quite naturally.

⁵The Desire Under the Elms (1958) by director Delbert Mann.

This attitude, and consequently a decreasing fear of death, had come gradually during life. A couple of respondents describe a more sudden disappearance of the fear of death in connection with "near death experiences."

Irrespective of how people have come to terms with death, our interviews indicate the great importance this seems to have for gerotranscendence and positive maturation in old age. None of the respondents who either feared death or avoided the question showed any signs of development towards gerotranscendence.

Mystery in Life

This theme, focusing the acceptance of the mysteries of life, was introduced in the following way:

Some people say that they have come to accept that there are things in life that can not be explained with science or reason, things that must be left incomprehensible, part of the mystery of life. Do you recognize this?

Several respondents recognized this and many pointed out that it had been a gradual change during life. An 85-year-old woman said:

I guess I have taken for granted [earlier] that science knows what it talks about. But now I have realized that there is an awful lot beyond the reach of human knowledge [and] especially senses, that we can't know anything about.

The same woman said that there may be "knowledge categories" that are quite different from those that we are used to.

A related thought was expressed by the 71-year-old man who thinks that what we can understand is limited by language. Language constrains us to a certain form of understanding, he says, and implies that transcending the barriers of language gives rise to new forms of understanding. He gives as examples music and painting, which may allow forms of understanding beyond those that can be expressed through language. This statement corresponds with Gamliel (2001) who observed that a group of people at a house for the elderly used to gather in silence before dinner:

Sitting together silently, they transcended the borders of past and future time to live in a "sacred present" or a "limbo time." By ignoring movements and sounds around them, they also transcended space . . . The

silence transcends the barriers of language, probably yielding to new insights.

Transcendental Sources of Happiness

The respondent quoted above had discovered music as a "gateway" to new insights. Similar experiences were related by a 77-year-old man who, however, kept them at a distance in front of the interviewer.

. . . one is, of course, a little softer now than before in certain situations. Above all, pretty music. The tears flow almost, well, my eyes get moist at least. There are other situations, too, . . . like drama and music. It wasn't like that before. But now it's a block that's breaking down . . . you experience it as a sort of euphoria, feeling of happiness. It has come during the last few years.

Regarded superficially, it may seem as though the man has simply become more interested in music or just has become more soft-hearted. The real meaning of this new source of joy can go deeper, however. The respondent himself says that it is a block that is breaking down. His experience of music borders on something that has previously been sealed off. Now, however, this block is released.

When the interview touched upon the joys of life and how these may have changed, there were many answers that can be seen as related to the example above. The transcendent Eva and many others said that earlier it was the more spectacular events that gave joy in life, but that now it is more a question of small and commonplace things. These are often, as in the case of Eva, events and experiences in nature. Not that the opportunities for spectacular events have vanished, it is the perspectives that have changed.

Instead of assuming that such changes are adaptations to decreasing possibilities in life, one must accordingly ask whether the increasing interest in the small everyday experiences of nature does not have a deeper significance. A 58-year-old man describes what this may be about:

I see trees, buds, and I see it blossom, and I see how the leaves are coming—I see myself in the leaves.

The experience of nature evokes the feeling of being at one with the universe, which is called *at-one-ment* in the Eastern tradition. The increasing significance of these small everyday experiences of nature could there-

fore be interpreted as a way in which the barrier between the self and the universe is transcended.

Almost all respondents who have children and grandchildren stressed their importance. This well-known phenomenon, too, can be given an interpretation in terms of the concept of transcendence. Through children and grandchildren the barriers between the present and the future as well as between life and death are transcended. "The coiling genetic chain" is present in the children and the grandchildren. This chain provides the opportunity to participate in life on earth in the future.

THE SELF DIMENSION GEROTRASCENDENCE

The first outline to the theory of gerotranscendence assumes that the individual self is gradually changing and developing. In this regard, the theory contrasts sharply with theories that assume that the self, like the perception of the self, is constant and ageless. In our interviews, we have approached the question of the constancy or variability of the self and the perception of the self in aging using several conversation themes.

Self-Confrontation

The constancy of perception of the self is partly dependent on the degree to which we discover the hidden aspects of our personality, what Jung calls *the shadow*. This theme was introduced in the following way:

Some people say that, during the course of life, they have begun to discover sides of themselves that they hadn't known before, both positive and negative. Do you recognize any of this in yourself?

Our respondents reported that they had discovered both positive and negative sides of themselves in their older years. An 85-year-old respondent discovered a literary talent. It can also be a question of previously unknown personal characteristics. One respondent discovered that she is actually a cheerful, light-hearted person, while another respondent realized that she is more serious than she had once thought. Still another respondent said that what he had earlier considered positive carefulness in his personality was in fact an exaggerated pedantry.

The latter case is not about discovering new qualities in oneself but rather about *redefining* qualities that were already known. Another example

of this redefinition of qualities is given by a 72-year-old man, a former labor union ombudsman, who used to think that his driving force was engagement and empathy, but who now understands that it was pure performance anxiety that drove him.

The most common discovery or redefinition, however, is about relationships to other people. Respondents described an egocentricity that they had previously been unconscious of. The 69-year-old woman who earlier in life thought that she had an unselfish interest in her children, has now discovered that it was really about something else:

I have been much too domineering . . . I kind of forced myself on them in a way.

Another respondent said, along similar lines:

I talked very egotistically about how I was doing. It was me all the time . . . I never listened to my children. Today I can listen.

Decrease in Self-Centeredness

In connection with the theme about self-confrontation, several respondents gave descriptions of how the perspective of the confined self had been transcended. In addition, this topic was introduced as a special theme using a somewhat different approach:

Some people say that they have changed their view of themselves during life in such a way that they no longer see themselves as being as important as before. Is this something that you recognize?

Considering the indoctrination of the people of this generation in Scandinavia with the theses of the Jante Law (first thesis: Don't think that you are important! [A. Sandemose, Danish-Norwegian writer]), it is not surprising that many reacted to this question by saying that they never felt important. The conflict between the egocentricity of early life and the self-denial of the Jante Law was also described by a 60-year-old woman:

Well, I guess I have always liked to be in the middle of things, I always talked a lot and expressed my opinion, but I never tried to be important.

This new insight during old age may be, in the best case, about realizing that one is not really as unimportant as the Jante Law implied nor as

unimportant as one felt. A 62-year-old woman formulated this insight in the following way:

I always had low self-confidence . . . always felt insufficient. It's only when looking back, in hindsight, that I can see that what I have achieved is not so bad.

Thus, for the people we interviewed, there has hardly been any inflated self-importance to transcend. Rather, it has been a question of struggling to establish a level of confidence that feels appropriate.

Self-Transcendence

The reactions to the self-confrontation theme illustrate, among other things, that people have come to see certain egotistical features in themselves, and replaced them with a higher degree of altruism. This type of change—from egoism to altruism—has been called self-transcendence by Chinen (1989b). The wishes and needs of the self are transcended in favor of other people's needs and wishes.

In interviews, this type of change was introduced in the following way:

If one thought in earlier life "I'll do this for myself," it has turned out later in life that one is more likely to do things for others. There has been a shift from doing things for oneself to doing things for others. Is this something that you recognize?

Even if the respondents during the earlier part of the interview spontaneously related their previous egoism, this introduction usually generated another reaction. The transcendent Eva seems quite sincere when saying that she always gave the well-being of the family priority over her own wishes and needs. In fact, all women giving an opinion on this theme answered similarly. Among the male interviews there are descriptions that are closer to the type of change referred to in the theme. An 85-year-old man said:

When I did things to improve myself . . . I did it for my own sake, because it gave me satisfaction, but also because it was to the benefit of the family. They were always in the picture. But I don't feel that way now. I must say that everything I do now is in order to help others.

Even if this man recognized the shift from egoism to altruism, there is also in this male report a description of a lifelong altruism. So, among

these men and women there seems not to be any real egoism to transcend, as implied in Chinen's (1985) afore mentioned analysis of the didactic messages of fairytales, where self-transcendence was a central motif.

Ego-Integrity

We tried to approach the eighth and last stage of development described in Erikson's (1950, 1982) psychological model of development using a theme introduced in the following way:

Some older people say that they feel that their life has now become a whole—even if their earlier life may have been uneven and chaotic. They have the feeling that the pieces of life's puzzle have fallen into place and formed a coherent pattern. Is this something that you recognize?

The stories told by our respondents were very similar to Erikson's description of the last and eighth stage of development. A 65-year-old woman said:

Earlier I thought that . . . if it weren't like this, if I had had a little more money, then things may have been different. But now I think . . . this is my life after all, and it didn't turn out all that bad.

A 62-year-old man said that the feeling of wholeness and coherence in life that has come lately is not stable. When alone, he often experiences the ego-integrity that Erikson speaks about. Under the pressure that he sometimes experiences with other people, this feeling of wholeness disappears. Many respondents told about the difficulty to achieve, or preserve, the experience of ego-integrity. In the case referred to above, tranquility and solitude is a prerequisite for the appearance and, in the best case, consolidation of ego-integrity.

THE SOCIAL AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS DIMENSION OF GEROTRASCENDENCE

A pilot assumption of the theory of gerotranscendence has been that what can superficially be interpreted as social disengagement could be understood as changes in point of view, shifts of emphasis, and redefinitions of the meaning of social relations. Guided by these assumptions, we have included the following themes in our interviews.

The Importance of Social Contacts During Different Phases of Life

Given the assumption that the nature and importance of social contacts can change character during the course of life, the following theme was introduced:

Some people say that their interest in other people changes character during the course of life. One becomes more selective and prefers deeper relationships with a few people rather than more superficial relationships with many people. Is this something that you recognize?

Some respondents said that they had not changed at all in this regard, but an even greater number of respondents said that they had. "Those superficial things that were fun when I was younger are not fun in the same way anymore," said a 79-year-old woman. The waning need for glamorous social company is well illustrated by the following statement by an 86-year-old woman:

I used to dance at the spring ball, I enjoyed it enormously. Now it's a tremendous difference. Now a few friends are quite enough, that's for sure. So [now] I have a much greater need for solitude. It's striking. It's extremely sufficient to meet and . . . just a few people, to sit down and talk. . . . One doesn't need so many.

The increased need for positive solitude, in contrast to loneliness, is evident in the above quotation as in the reports of many other respondents. A 77-year-old man said:

I appreciate solitude more now. You know, you become fed up with company faster. And you feel that a lot of talking is just nonsense. . . . You long for home and a good book instead, or to put on a record.

It appears clearly in these and other interviews that we are not dealing with a kind of passive withdrawal, as a young observer may easily think. It is rather about changes in the importance of social relationships. We shed the company and activities that lack content, we become more selective, preferring literature or music, or a few friends. Not because of lack of possibilities, but of choice.

Sometimes, a former professional life has forced people into social patterns that they never asked for and that they can easily give up. An 85-year-old man showed his relief through a symbolic act:

As long as I was working I had to go to different things. Then I had both tails and a tuxedo. Tails were required at some dinners, at others a tuxedo. The day I retired I got rid of both the tails and the tuxedo.

The latter quotation is not about a redefinition of the importance of social contacts. The man had always disliked the big parties, but only after his retirement could he reconcile interest and behavior.

Social Masks

An insight that increases with maturation is assumed to be that certain social interactions are merely role playing, where the role does not necessarily fit the actor very well. This theme was introduced in the following way:

Some people say that they have become more and more conscious about the fact that interaction with other people is a masquerade, role playing. Some have gotten the inclination to throw off their mask or role. Is this something that you recognize?

The transcendent Eva said that she was good at playing "the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie," but that she had now changed behavior. She claimed explicitly that it is a question of maturation. Another 60-year-old woman said:

I don't think that older people need to wear masks. It's just so clear that everyone is allowed to be himself. I don't have anyone to answer to, it doesn't matter if they think I'm strange. . . . I think that's a great relief, you know.

Many respondents mentioned that the new capacity to "be oneself" is related to an increased self-confidence. Earlier, there was the tendency to fear not being accepted and to hide behind the kind of role offered by, for example, work or motherhood. "It feels like I don't need to take on any role because I'm confident in myself," said a 69-year-old woman.

Some people who tell about the increasing inclination to "be oneself" still stress the necessity of playing roles in various situations. "Out in society, of course, we play our roles and wear our masks," said the transcendent Eva. Several respondents had similar thoughts. Roles are necessary for life to function, and can be played easily even when they are not "genuine." Those respondents had discovered and accepted the difference

between the self and necessary roles. As we can see, these reports poorly match the idea of Biggs (2003, 2004), who suggests that more and more of a masquerade accompanies aging. Now, it may well be that the masquerade is a sign of not developing in a gerotranscendental way, of being hampered in development, since our respondents, who might be regarded as examples of those who have developed in a gerotranscendental way, reject the masquerade.

Emancipated Innocence

A frequent theme in many of the open theme reports was an almost roguish delight in breaking away from the role expectations or social conventions that were earlier seen as compelling. A 68-year-old woman related:

Now I don't care a bit about what people think. . . . I dare to go out biking or walking in [X-town] wearing torn stockings, I couldn't do that before. . . . Sometimes I think, but I really can't do this, you know . . . but I do it anyway.

The delight in doing things that one did not earlier dare to do falls most closely into the theme that we, following Chinen (1989a), have called *emancipated innocence*. It refers to a capacity to break away from certain social conventions. A new kind of innocence and spontaneity is added to adult judgment and rationality. This allows important feelings and questions to be expressed regardless of the barriers of social conventions.

A special quality of this new attitude seems to be that people can admit that they do not know about something without feeling embarrassed. It is not only a question of not caring about making a fool of oneself, it also involves the recognition that an admission of ignorance is far from foolish. A 60-year-old man said:

Previously I had to read the newspaper in order to keep up with what was going on, in order to have something. . . well, people should not be able to attack me because I didn't know this or that. Today I read the newspaper only when I feel like it. . . . I no longer have the need to pretend to know more than I do.

This change is connected with other, parallel changes. A 72-year-old man associated his new capacity of emancipated innocence with his decreasing interest in his own prestige:

Since I don't care about prestige anymore I don't feel it's such a big deal to make a fool of myself once in a while. . . . I used to take that very seriously, if I said something stupid at a meeting or something like that.

Summarizing the messages from our respondents, the increased capacity for emancipated innocence was associated with a) practice and experience, b) personal maturity, c) a redefinition of what constitutes foolish behavior, and d) less need for prestige, coupled with a greater degree of self-confidence.

Attitude Towards Material Assets

In both spiritual and worldly contexts, owning property is described as an obstacle for spiritual or political growth and freedom. Religions describe asceticism as one of the paths to insight and wisdom. Similar advice is often given by political revolutionary movements. In a discussion of power and dependence, Blau (1964) argues that revolutionary ideologies frequently include an ambition to reduce materialistic needs, in this way decreasing the power of an adversary offering materialistic goods, and keeping the revolutionary spirit alive.

The common denominator of these attitudes is that focusing on material assets has a stagnating, pacifying, and petrifying function. Less focus on material assets, on the other hand, is said to promote both spiritual and revolutionary growth. This thought is also found in some of the folk tales analyzed by Chinen (1989b). The path to wisdom is easier when material needs are transcended.

Quite in line with this theoretical point of departure, a 72-year-old man spontaneously described how his not insignificant fortune restricts him:

It's tiresome to own. . . . one becomes locked up, one isn't free when one owns. . . . Many say the opposite, but that's wrong. The more you own, the more you have to take care of, to manage, to watch out for. Now I have as much as I'm interested in. I have put up a limit at SEK 500,000 [approx \$70,000]. I don't want more. I was on my way up, but I said "no," and went down.

This man has in no way turned his back on material possessions, but he has realized that owning things limits his freedom and has therefore set a limit. A 57-year-old woman expressed an almost identical view telling how she has come to experience her art collecting of 20 years as a burden.

She argues that "the later part of the journey through life should be made with lighter luggage," having enough for a modern definition of the necessities of life, but not more. One should eat and drink well, but not stockpile money, said a 79-year-old woman. We might call it a kind of *modern asceticism*.

The insight expressed in the above statements is that an economic buffer is good to have, but that the volatility of material assets makes saving beyond that meaningless. Many show a tendency to try and reduce the number of "things" they own. "I'm an expert in getting rid of things," said an 80-year-old woman.

Everyday Wisdom

It is often thought that practical everyday wisdom or common sense increases with age. This was the point of departure when the following theme was introduced:

Some people think that it has become easier and easier to make wise decisions and help others to make decisions. What is your experience of this?

A number of respondents answered in a way that makes one assumption in our question explicit, namely, that it is possible to distinguish between wise and unwise decisions. The respondents often reached the conclusion that it has become more difficult to identify the boundary between wise and unwise.

Given the experience that the boundaries between right and wrong, wise and unwise are transcended, the consequence for everyday wisdom is to refrain from giving advice or helping others to make decisions. The transcendent Eva said that what she had learned above all was to refrain from giving good advice. In a similar vein, an 80-year-old woman said:

I guess I used to think that I always made good decisions and gave good advice, too. I have been in a situation where I have had to give a lot of advice. . . . I had no problems with it. How is it now? I guess I must say that I avoid giving advice. I suppose I have learned that what I think is wise for me can be very unwise for others.

Another way of expressing this new approach is in terms of an increased broadmindedness, tolerance, and humility in response to other people's

behavior. Tolerance and acceptance of other people's views have increased. A 78-year-old man said that:

. . . I guess I used to have strong views of everything, but I don't today. I understand that it's not. . . . it is not so simple, it depends.

In the case of an 88-year-old woman, broadmindedness had gone so far that she, with a bit of ironical distance to herself, said, "In the end, I don't see any criminals, either."

In summary, in these reports everyday wisdom is expressed by avoiding both giving good advice and helping people make decisions. The origin of this form of everyday wisdom is the transcendence of the boundary between right and wrong accompanied by an increased broadmindedness and tolerance.

OBSTACLES AND SHORTCUTS ON THE PATH TO GEROTRASCENDENCE

Since, according to the theory, the development towards gerotranscendence can be obstructed as well as facilitated, it is reasonable to assume various catalysts and obstacles to be described in the interviews. This was also the case. These catalysts and obstacles are described in the following.

Owning as a Burden

One obstacle was identified in the above thematic survey—unnecessary material assets. Even if none of the respondents advocated pure asceticism, several spontaneously argued that owning too much may be burdensome and binding. Others, elaborating on the same theme, recommended that the latter part of the journey through life should be made with "light luggage." In addition, there were descriptions of how this has been achieved by giving away a good deal of property and adopting a simpler life. A 60-year-old woman, who did just that, said:

I want to own as little property as I can. I have simple china, simple knives and spoons. I want it that way. I don't want it the way it used to be. It's great fun if the kids can use it. . . . Some of it is packed up, I don't want to unpack it. I think living simply is nice, but I wish I was living out in the country.

This quotation not only reflects a longing for comfortable simplicity—what we called earlier *modern asceticism*—but also a longing for the country life. The interview revealed that the attraction was the refreshing ascetic solitude near nature. This could be a side effect of the current “back to nature” trend, but we could just as well refer to parallels from other time periods and other cultures. In the Indian religion, since the ancient Vedic culture more than 3000 years ago, there have been ideas about how to live in order to achieve purification of the soul and eventual attainment of nirvana. Tilak (1989) describes how, during the Dharma Sastra period (200 B.C.–200 A.D.), life is explicitly organized in four phases, each with different content and meaning. These phases are: 1) the student, 2) the housekeeper, 3) the hermit, and 4) the wanderer. Characteristic of the latter two periods is the giving up of material goods. During the hermit phase, the old man, possibly accompanied by his wife, is expected to give up his house and lands, join other hermits in the woods and lead a simple life. During the last phase, the wanderer or beggar phase, he has given up all earthly goods and wanders alone from village to village.

Tilak holds that the idea of these phases still remains in the normative cultural heritage in India. A modern version of the hermit phase, for example, may consist in an old man or woman periodically isolating himself or herself in a room to meditate. This behavior, thanks to the living cultural heritage, is neither misunderstood nor opposed.

It must be understood that none of our interviewees aimed at anything like the extreme poverty and isolation described in the old Vedic tradition. Rather they wanted to live a modern, comfortable, but simple life, understanding the trap inherent in excessive owning.

Positive Solitude

The modern asceticism described above also contains a prominent element of what we call *positive solitude*. The need for and the pleasure of contemplative solitude are evident in most of our interviews. There are at least two reasons for this. One reason is that solitude seems to be necessary in order to achieve and consolidate one's ego-integrity. The other reason is that one has become more selective in terms of activities and social interactions. The man who preferred to read a book or listen to a record expressed part of these two aspects at the same time. While he experienced social interaction with certain other people as tiresome and meaningless, there was also a new need for the joy and stimulation offered by solitary activities.

The need and search for positive solitude is not the same as ultimately choosing loneliness over interaction with others. Rather, the need for positive solitude comes and goes. A woman said:

I need periods of solitude, then it feels good to work things out and maybe change my behavior. And I feel that those periods make me feel well and that I need them. Other people can't understand that perhaps.

This woman eventually touches on a question which is not unessential, namely other people's lack of understanding of the importance of positive solitude. The Swedish language lacks a cognate of the primarily positive English word *solitude*. This may be a further reason why the positive need for solitude may be misinterpreted in terms of negative disengagement, depression, apathy or resignation. Of course, this kind of loneliness exists, too. It has been exemplified by Greta who appears to have stopped in her development towards gerotranscendence. The point is that we probably misinterpret some people's need for a positive solitude as signs of depression or negative withdrawal.

Life Crises

The theoretical discussion of the concept of transcendence emphasizes the possible role of life crises as catalysts. Life crises may contain the *kinetic energy* that make the development towards gerotranscendence accelerate.

Our interviews contain several examples in which crises have contributed to an accelerated development towards gerotranscendence. An 80-year-old woman described how the death of a close friend a couple of years ago had changed her and helped her to develop:

I guess I was a noli me tangere type. This means "don't touch me." ... Now I think that I have come closer to people, I understand people better, I am more open to them, I notice that when I give of myself, I get something back. So I have come closer to people than I used to. ... This change was triggered when he died 2 years ago. When I realized that one must give and not only take.

A 68-year-old man told us, in a similar way, about how his heart disease and operation opened him up to thoughts that he had not had before. A book that would not have interested him before became the gateway to a process of change:

I think there is so much in these new things that I have learned that makes things fall into place. You just lose the fear of death, and then there is so much to learn, and there is a lot to be done there . . . so I'm in the middle of a process where I have a lot to learn.

The life crisis changed the direction of this man's life not only through the power of the crisis itself, but also by preparing him for new thoughts and impressions. In this way, crises can be said to have a double effect.

One way of understanding life crises in this context is that they consist of upheavals that challenge or question the foundations of one's concept of reality. The death of a close relative, for example, undermines ideas of immortality, the notion that "it won't happen to me," and the idea that it is never too late to change. In scientific terminology, we would say that crises might challenge, question, and undermine basic ontological assumptions, replacing them with new ontological assumptions.

Bridges and Landings

Our respondents gave several examples of what could be called mediating links or bridges to different aspects of gerotranscendence. The transcendent Eva talked about how experiences of nature—swallows flying like arrows over her head, picking nettles for soup—give her life meaning. This can be understood both as part of her gerotranscendence and as a bridge to it. The development towards gerotranscendence seems to be stimulated by small experiences of nature. Also, the 59-year-old man's ability to see himself in the leaves on the trees can be interpreted in the same way.

The transcendent quality of experiences of nature offers a new way of understanding the increased interest in nature and gardening expressed by many older people. Old people's interest in their gardens is often interpreted in other ways, seen as a sort of therapy or a way to fill up their otherwise idle lives.

Apart from experiences of nature, our interview material also contains descriptions of experiences of music and drama as parts of or bridges to gerotranscendence. In the section on sources of happiness, a 77-year-old man related how experiences of music had become more important and more emotional for him. This statement can be interpreted in several ways. The man himself said that it was a barrier that had been broken down. In our terminology, we would say that it was the barrier between music and emotion that had been transcended, or that music helps in

transcending a number of barriers. Music becomes a bridge to a transcendent experience of the whole. In such an interpretation, the increased emotional element stands out as something positive, as an indication that certain barriers have been demolished. Using other frames of reference, the same report could be interpreted as pathological. The increasing emotionality, the softening up, becomes a symptom of a disintegrating personality. The latter interpretation is the most common in the geropsychiatry literature.

However, if the experiences of nature and music are considered in parallel, certain similarities can be seen that clearly indicate their transcendental character. Both cases deal with experiences that appeal more to the emotions than to the intellect. The dimensions of experiences of both nature and music are relatively free. Their limits are set subjectively; they are not limited by predetermined categories. The relative freedom from boundaries, frames, and rules that characterize these experiences can thus become bridges to new ways of defining existential categories.

THE SIGNS OF GEROTRASCENDENCE

Summing up the messages from the qualitative interviews, our selective group of aging individuals display in various degrees a series of characteristic signs of their development. These signs belong in three different dimensions:

The Cosmic Dimension

- *Time and childhood.* Changes in the definitions of time and the return of childhood. The transcendence of borders between past and present occurs. Childhood comes to life—sometimes interpreted in a new reconciling way.
- *Connection to earlier generations.* Attachment increases. A change from link to chain perspective ensues. The important is not the individual link (life), but rather the chain (stream of life).
- *Life and death.* The fear of death disappears and a new comprehension of life and death results.
- *Mystery in life.* The mystery dimension in life is accepted.
- *Rejoicing.* From grand events to subtle experiences. The joy of experiencing macro cosmos in micro cosmos materializes, often related to experiences in nature.

The Dimension of the Self

- *Self-confrontation.* The discovery of hidden aspects of the self—both good and bad—occurs.
- *Decrease of self-centeredness.* Removal of the self from the center of one's universe may eventuate. However, if self-esteem from the beginning is low, it may rather be a question of struggling to establish a level of confidence that feels appropriate.
- *Development of body-transcendence.* Taking care of the body continues, but the individual is not obsessed with it.
- *Self-transcendence.* A shift may occur from egoism to altruism. This may be a special matter for men.
- *Ego-integrity.* The individual realizes that the pieces of life's jigsaw puzzle form a wholeness. This may be a delicate state, demanding tranquility and solitude.

The Dimension of Social and Personal Relationships

- *Changed meaning and importance of relations.* One becomes more selective and less interested in superficial relations, exhibiting an increasing need for periods of solitude.
- *Role playing.* An understanding of the difference between self and role takes place, sometimes with an urge to abandon roles. A new comforting understanding of the necessity of roles in life often results.
- *Emancipated innocence.* Innocence enhances maturity. A new capacity to transcend needless social conventions.
- *Modern asceticism.* An understanding of the petrifying gravity of wealth and the freedom of asceticism develops. Having enough for a modern definition of the necessities of life, but not more.
- *Everyday wisdom.* The reluctance of superficially separating right from wrong, and thus withholding from judgments and giving advice is discerned. Transcendence of the right-wrong duality accompanied by an increased broadmindedness and tolerance ensues.

DEVELOPMENT BEYOND BOTH DISENGAGEMENT AND EGO-INTEGRITY

Drawing on our interviews it must be made clear that the development towards gerotranscendence cannot be regarded as any uniform develop-

ment that characterizes all aging individuals. We should rather talk about it as a developmental possibility, where the precise form of the gerotranscendence can differ from individual to individual. Also, there are several pathways to gerotranscendence. It may be that the *seed* of gerotranscendence is within us all, but needs proper watering to grow. In today's society, we probably lack much of the proper watering, which also means that the proportion of individuals who reach high degrees of gerotranscendence is quite small.

Nevertheless, in our interviews, mainly based on individuals who may have come further than others, some rather distinct dimensions and aspects of gerotranscendence did crystallize. This does not mean that every subject was characterized by all these aspects. Some of the aspects of gerotranscendence, as summarized above, were recognized by most of the interviewees, while some were recognized by just a few.

The need for and the pleasure of contemplative *positive solitude* is highly evident in our interviews. This call for positive solitude as described by our respondents is, however, not the same as loneliness and disengagement. Rather, it is part of a development wherein they have become more selective. This eventually touches on a question that is essential, namely, that the developmental changes described by our interviewees could be given different interpretations. One set of interpretations stems from traditional gerontological theories, while other interpretations are rooted in a different paradigm as offered by the theory of gerotranscendence.

The decreasing interest in participating in certain social and personal relationships could, from a traditional perspective, be regarded as a negative disengagement, or as part of a social breakdown syndrome. But, at least among our respondents, the meaning of this behavior must be interpreted quite differently—as part of a positive developmental change. In the same vein, *emancipated innocence* could be regarded as a mental breakdown symptom, even though our interviews suggest it should be interpreted as part of a positive transcendence of futile social conventions.

Our interviews show that these and other aspects of gerotranscendence form, for the individual, coherent developmental patterns, of which high degrees of life satisfaction and absence of depression and neurotic symptoms are parts. The conclusion must be that the traditional interpretations have a limited scope. Sometimes traditional interpretations of behaviors such as those mentioned above may be appropriate, sometimes they may be totally wrong. A new understanding, as offered by the theory of gerotranscendence, might at times be more intelligible.

The developmental perspective in the theory of gerotranscendence is certainly very different from the old disengagement theory, but what about its relationship to Erikson's (1950, 1982, 1986) model of personal development?

The argument here is that gerotranscendence goes beyond Erikson's theory. In both cases the process of aging is regarded as a developmental process, which, at very best, ends with a higher state of maturity—in Erikson's case, ego-integrity, in ours, gerotranscendence. In Erikson's theory, the ego-integration primarily refers to an integration of the elements in the life that has passed. The individual reaches a fundamental acceptance of the life lived, regardless of how good or bad it might seem from the outside. In this way the ego-integrity described by Erikson becomes more of a backwards integration process within the same definition of the world as before, while the process of gerotranscendence implies more of a forward or outward direction, including a redefinition of reality. After reading a description of the theory of gerotranscendence, Joan M. Erikson, wife and co-worker of Erik H. Erikson, wrote in a personal communication (1995) to the author of this book:

When I got 91 myself, I became aware of the inadequacy of the words "wisdom" and "integrity," feeling that they in no way represented what I was experiencing as an elder. . . . So boldly I revised the Eighth Stage . . . including a Ninth and Tenth Stage, which even attempt to deal with "gerotranscendence."

In 1997 an extended version of *The Life Cycle Completed* (Erikson, 1997) was published with new chapters on gerotranscendence and a ninth stage of development, written by Joan M. Erikson.

So, it seems evident that gerotranscendence goes beyond both disengagement and ego-integrity, while it perhaps, in line with Baltes (1993), could be argued that when our respondents talk about an increased broad-mindedness and a tendency to avoid simple distinguishing between right and wrong, this could be understood within the first of Baltes's three metacriteria of wisdom, which are: 1) *Relativism*, the development away from ideological positions associated with dogmatism, rightness, and lack of tolerance; 2) *Life-span contextualism*, the defense against the predominance of the present in the conduct and interpretation of life; and 3) *Management of uncertainty*, the development away from the hegemony of determinism and rationality.

These criteria seem close to some aspects of gerotranscendence. But, while the aspects of gerotranscendence go beyond our "normal" paradigmatic world, Baltes's criteria remain within it. When, for example, Baltes describes relativism as a metacriterion of wisdom, he is only describing a behavior or a mode of thinking, while the theory of gerotranscendence understands this on a new paradigmatic level. The relativism described by Baltes is only a specific, manifest aspect of the general tendency to transcend boundaries and old forms of understanding reality, which is the essence of gerotranscendence.