



FROM CHAPTER 2

THE DAWN OF A NEW THIRD AGE

To understand and appreciate this emerging frontier, we need fresh terms so that we do not become bogged down by conventional, enervating assumptions about becoming older. One reason we get locked into old paradigms of aging is because we lack the language to describe alternatives. It's hard to see something if we can't name it. And it's harder yet to say something different with a limited, worn out vocabulary.

We like a phrase commonly used in Europe, Canada, and Australia, the *third age*. The term is catching on in America. In other countries the third age usually refers to retirement. To us it signifies something much more significant.

This term is virtually free of the stereotypes and limiting expectations generally attached to middle age and aging. Because the expression is so new to Americans, it generates questions; and that inquiry can be a start to opening our minds. It has generally meant the period between second age activities and the fourth age. In other countries it has often been seen as a time for retirees to be involved in lifelong learning, promoted by programs such as third age universities.

For us the third age signifies a change in the life structure, a revolution that provides an opportunity to transform aging and experience fulfillment. It designates a new landscape in the life course, from fifty to the late seventies, even the early eighties.

As more and more people realize the potential offered by the third age, we are likely to see a change in our country to support alternative life options after fifty. The time is now ripe to start making changes in our culture, institutions, work and retirement policies, and lifestyles.

In our society people have by and large focused on the second age. We now spend the first quarter century of our lives preparing for it. Common measures of success have been based on second age achievements in work, family, finances, and community. Today's cultural heroes are for the most part recognized for what they do or have done in their second age.

There's a cultural lag between what we can become in the third age and the stereotypes of people over fifty. Negative images still abound in the workplace, the media, advertisements, birthday cards, and jokes about aging. Contrary ideas such as our message often evoke glassy-eyed stares. Invest to develop people in their fifties and sixties and seventies? That notion still seems too fanciful, and extravagant, to be taken seriously.

In spite of emerging signs of vitality in people over fifty, most of us do not yet have an adequate sense of the new frontier ahead of us. A fulfilling third age is just not on our life maps. We all need to question our own life maps and the road we're traveling. Do you see the road ahead as a cul-de-sac? Or is it a fork in the road? Or is it off the road? Do you want to settle down or change course?

The pioneers in our research show that the third age offers paths to fulfillment other generations could never have imagined. It's time to empty the trash in our heads and draw new life maps. The English poet Robert Browning's poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" (1864) was way ahead of its time. The Rabbi proclaims:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made.

That sentiment represents a discovery about life after fifty, an insight we are just beginning to catch up with. A scientist once observed, “Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody else has thought.” What are you thinking?

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