

TOWARD A PRACTICAL THEORY OF AGING

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There are a number of stereotypes attributed to aging adults. They are described by some as accident-prone, disease-prone, poorly coordinated, energy-less, without sexual desire; unable to learn new things, slow, forgetful, declining in intelligence, grouchy, touchy, depressed, unhappy, full of self-pity, lonely, isolated—from family and friends, non-productive, time-wasters, radio-addicts.¹ The reader can, no doubt, recall some experiences with aging adults that reinforce such images; but to cast all into such a mold would be to do great injustice to a large number of people. Yet, a political figure in Korea stated earlier this year that persons over sixty years of age should stay home and not vote on election day. Stating such a foolish perspective would be tantamount to committing political suicide in Washington, D.C., but he has been elevated to a cabinet-level position since then and will likely run for president in the next election. It is possible that this action reflects the changing nature of the younger generation's perception of the older generation. Such stereotypes represent a warped view of a group of people and are harmful if believed.

Because of these misrepresentations of the aging, adult workers have been forced to search for a more practical theory of how people really do age and what might be expected of those who are aged adults. Two main schools of thought developed, and both of these schools are “based on the observed facts that as people grow older their behavior changes, the activities that characterized them in middle age become curtailed, and the extent of their social interaction decreases.”² One theory of aging subscribes to a mutual withdrawal of society and individual to explain

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¹Erdman Palmore and George L. Maddox, “Sociological Aspects of Aging,” in *Behavior and Adaptation in Late Life*, 2d ed., ed. Ewald W. Busse and Eric Pfeiffer (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), 39-42.

²Robert J. Havighurst, Bernice L. Neugarten, and Sheldon S. Tobin, “Disengagement and Patterns of Aging,” in *Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology*, ed. Bernice L. Neugarten (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 161.

the observed behavior changes, whereas the second view holds to the continued maintenance of a middle-aged life style until forced to substitute another activity. The former view is identified as disengagement theory and the latter as activity theory, although “these are hardly theories in the strict sense of the word”; but they do “perform much of the function of theory by systematizing some of the information about aging and making certain predictions about behavior in old age.”³

The two theories seem to complement each other rather than disprove one or the other. Nevertheless, certain inadequacies that have led to theoretical offspring will be identified. Certain conclusions concerning the various views will seek to assist the devising of a practical theory of aging. Then, the writer will conclude by presenting some practical implications for adult Christian education.

THE DISENGAGEMENT THEORY OF AGING

The disengagement theory was originally set forth by Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry in their book *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement* (1961). There are some common misinterpretations of the theory. Also, there are several weaknesses in the theory, many of which were later acknowledged by the authors.

The Formulation of Cumming and Henry

The disengagement theory is based upon a study of 279 persons aged fifty to ninety in the Kansas City area. The sample was restricted to “white respondents of the working and middle class”; who were “free of such chronic illnesses as would render them incapable of acting in their customary roles at work or in the home”; and had a “history of mobility, for almost all of them had come to Kansas City from somewhere else.” The study involved the use of five interviews that lasted approximately an hour and a half for those from age fifty to seventy. The older group underwent only three interviews. These interviews were held at six-month intervals.⁴

³ Vern L. Bengtson, *The Social Psychology of Aging* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1973), 42.

⁴ Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry, *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement*, with a Foreword by Talcott Parsons (New York: Basic Books, 1961), 28-33.

The authors of the disengagement theory mention three assumptions which obtain for their interpretation of their findings: (1) "We assume that the nature of old age is immediately derived from the nature of adulthood"—hence, growth and development "follow a pattern in which each phase is determined by the one which went before it"; (2) "The total social environment is the most important focus of study for human behavior"; and (3) "The individual has access to the whole culture, directly or indirectly, and . . . he exercises some freedom of choice in selecting his contacts with its various values and institutions."⁵

Disengagement is defined as "an inevitable process in which many of the relationships between a person and other members of society are severed, and those remaining are altered in quality."⁶ The goal is for "the equilibrium which existed in middle life between the individual and his society" to give way "to a new equilibrium characterized by a greater distance and an altered type of relationship."⁷ The major characteristics of this theory are spelled out in the listing of nine postulates. The first postulate sets forth the inevitability of a mutual withdrawal by society and the individual. The second postulate indicates that disengagement is irreversible once the process begins. The third postulate indicates that there are sex differences—i.e., the beginning point for men being retirement and the beginning point for women being widowhood. These two events seem to give formal permission to disengage. The fourth postulate states that initiation of disengagement may come from either society or the individual. The fifth postulate declares that societal influence will be primary if there is "disjunction." The sixth postulate indicates that the reduction of social life space brought on by retirement or widowhood will produce "crisis and low morale unless different roles, appropriate to the disengaged state, are available." The seventh postulate states three conditions that reveal an individual's "readiness for disengagement"—(1) awareness of the approaching nearness of death, (2) decreasing life space, and (3) decline in ego energy. The eighth postulate sets forth the idea that there will be a shift in the quality of remaining role relationships once a person disengages from his primary role and its related interaction. The ninth postulate declares that disengagement is universal, although influenced by culture.⁸

⁵Ibid., 11-12.

⁶Ibid., 211.

⁷Ibid., 15.

⁸Ibid., 210-18.

There are three types of changes that give evidence that disengagement is taking place. First, there should be observable changes in “the number of people with whom the individual habitually interacts” and “in the amount of interaction with them.” There also may be change in the purpose of the interactions—a change also discernible. Second, decreased involvement should lead to “qualitative changes in the style or patterns of interaction between the individual and the other members of the system.” Third, there should be personality changes that “both cause and result in decreased involvement with others and his increased preoccupation with himself.”⁹

A more curious change that results from disengagement is that, as the aged persons become further removed from societal influence through disengagement, they become less controlled by norms and, hence, more idiosyncratic.¹⁰

Cumming and Henry conclude their supporting evidence for the theory by saying,

To sum up, we suggest that given an adequate income, the very old enjoy their disengaged existence. They have reduced their ties to life, have shed their cares and responsibilities and turned to concern with themselves. They lead static, tranquil, somewhat self-centered lives, which suit them very well and appear to provide smooth passage from a long life to an inevitable death.¹¹

Some Misinterpretations of Disengagement

Arnold M. Rose specifies that there are three common misinterpretations of the disengagement theory. In order to allay such mistaken notions, he indicates what disengagement is not:

It is *not* an hypothesis which states that, as people get older, they are gradually separated from their associations and their social functions. Such a hypothesis had been stated many times before Cumming and Henry and was generally assumed to be a fact. After all, this is what was meant by Burgess (1950) in his discussion of the “roleless role.” Nor does the theory of disengagement state that, as people become physically feeble or chronically ill, they are thereby forced to abandon their association and social functions. This is a matter of logic and also long been assumed to be a fact.

Cumming and Henry (1961) wisely excluded from their sample any person who was in poor physical or mental health and explicitly denied that their conception of disengagement rests on ill health. Finally, the theory of disengagement does *not* say that because older people tend to have a reduced income in our society, they can no longer afford to participate in many

⁹Ibid., 15.

¹⁰Ibid., 46.

¹¹Ibid., 209.

things. That also would be a matter of logic and has long been known to be a fact. Cumming and Henry wisely excluded from their sample anyone who did not have the minimum of money needed for independence.¹²

It seems apparent from these statements that Rose was not only seeking to destroy a “straw horse” but also to lay a foundation for properly defending or attacking the theory.

Some Weaknesses of Disengagement

Cumming and Henry acknowledged certain weaknesses in their material. They point out that “numerous studies have reported demoralization among older people” but that their own findings indicate that it is “only temporary.” In light of the conflicting discovery, they write that they “cannot preclude the possibility that our results are partly a function of our morale-measuring instrument, or that other studies do not discriminate among the various stages of disengagement.”¹³ If one or the other is faulty, the problem is likely one of procedural error (or bias). A second matter that is less than certain in application is how widowhood fits into the disengagement theory. Theoretically, it should fit quite well once the initial shock of the loss is overcome, but the authors have to admit that “not all women respond favorably to the widowed state”—a number even committing suicide. They continue, “Perhaps we are dealing, in our study group, with survivors of this transition, and have missed the depressed, despondent widows, because they did not meet our criteria of good health and economic stability.”¹⁴ The implication is that widowhood may not fit well into the disengagement process for all widows. One other significant problem is mentioned—i.e., that the authors “occasionally” find older people “who have remained remarkably firmly engaged.” The authors are not certain whether these persons are “especially endowed physically” or what the cause might be, but they expect that these few “will eventually disengage.” One lady “appears to be one of those few people who have stayed engaged because they have such a high level of vitality, place a high value on activity, and tolerate obligatory contact excellently well

¹²Arnold M. Rose, “A Current Theoretical Issue in Social Gerontology,” in *Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology*, ed. Bernice L. Neugarten (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 184-85.

¹³Cumming and Henry, *Growing Old*, 141-42.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 157-58.

when very old [82 years of age].”¹⁵ Cumming and Henry comment that this woman’s high morale score was equal to that of the disengaged who were most satisfied and that she “may resemble the disengaged oldest people in having freely chosen her style of life. Perhaps the essence of good morale is such a free choice rather than ability to disengage per se. The latter may appear to be the cause because most choose it.”¹⁶ If the authors gave such credibility to the last statement, they would not have espoused their disengagement theory. Yet, there is a possibility that free choice may be the key.

The authors apparently overlooked other problem areas in their presentation. They pointed out the problem of researcher bias in any sampling—even in the framing of objective-type questionnaires. In order to avoid such a problem in determining a participant’s morale, the authors “resorted finally to a direct and intuitive judgment.”¹⁷ To determine the ego energy available, pictures were given to the participants; and they were told to make up stories based upon them—stories that were then “objectively” analyzed. These picture-stories indicated an increased self-preoccupation and a decreased response to normative control.¹⁸ The authors stated elsewhere that “the tendency to find what is being sought is very hard to overcome.”¹⁹ It would appear that the statement applies admirably in the interpretations of the picture-stories. Another example of the authors overlooking a problem area was in the discussion of certain professions, such as preachers, artists, and teachers, that “either do not retire at all or move easily into the expressive orientation of the old.” These people continue their activity into later life; yet Cumming and Henry casually state that such occupations “have by their very nature a style more compatible with the disengaged condition.”²⁰

Other writers emphasize various weaknesses of the disengagement theory. Hochschild chides the authors for describing some people as “disengaged” when they “by all indicators were fully engaged in an

¹⁵Ibid., 196-98.

¹⁶Ibid., 209.

¹⁷Ibid., 130-31.

¹⁸Ibid., 127.

¹⁹Ibid., 133n.

²⁰Ibid., 146.

active social life.” The authors claimed they were “active in roles ‘appropriate to the disengaged state.’”²¹ Hochschild writes,

In *Growing Old*, several types of escape-clause explanation [*sic*] are offered that prevent these anomalous older people from being counted as evidence against the theory. First, old engagers are said to be “unsuccessful” disengagers. They have not “achieved” the final psychological stages of “fixed conformity,” described as “ego defect” for men and “internalized rigidity” and “externalized ego defect” for women (pp. 120, 125). According to the theorists, these older engaged people are not evidence of the theory’s lack of universality; instead they provide evidence that bears on “success” defined, as it is, in this unique way. A person is either a successful disengager or an unsuccessful disengager, but in neither case is he engaged.²²

Kalish points out that establishing that disengagement occurs does not prove that it is “a natural or inevitable process” or that it is “a positive aid in successful aging.”²³ It may not lead to successful aging, for one study of 250 older people (Maddox, 1963) clearly indicated that “morale was directly related to their level of activity.” Increased levels were “predictive of increased morale, and decreased activity levels of decreased morale.” He continues by stating that “the majority of both popular and professional opinion supports the idea not only that involvement and activity are helpful in successful aging but that they may even help in maintaining survival itself.”²⁴

One study of the aging indicates that nearness to death is “more important than age *per se*, and that his actual distance from death is only loosely linked to the individual’s conscious concern about it.” The study found that “those who were two years away from death did show signs of disengagement, while those who were not, did not. This suggests that disengagement may be more a 2-year than a 20- or 30-year process, and that age, distance from death, and awareness of it are crucially different.”²⁵ Interestingly, those who were near death were characterized as “less affectively complex, less assertive and aggressive, and more docile, dependent, and intimacy-oriented than those far from death. They

²¹Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Disengagement Theory: A Logical, Empirical, and Phenomenological Critique,” in *Time, Roles, and Self in Old Age*, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1976), 69.

²²*Ibid.*, 56.

²³Richard A. Kalish, *Late Adulthood: Perspectives on Human Development* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1975), 64.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Hochschild, “Disengagement Theory,” 65.

were also . . . less introspective, which disengagement theory would not predict.”²⁶

Another study indicated that several young, unemployed workers during the depression gave “descriptions akin to a pattern of disengagement.” The study cited several examples: “They lost interest in newspapers and books, did not take advantage of extra leisure time, became more and more pessimistic, became passive and disinterested generally in any activity.” From this study, Hochschild, the researcher, concludes that the similarity of the description of these folk in a time of economical depression to that of a disengaged older person indicates a possible relationship of both to economic factors.²⁷

The Duke longitudinal study (Palmore, 1968) revealed that men had “almost no overall reduction during a 10-year period in activities or life satisfaction. Two-fifths . . . showed less than an 8 percent change in activities, and one-fifth actually showed increases of 8 percent or more in activities. It was concluded that while many of the aged may disengage or reduce activities in some areas, the majority tend to compensate by increasing activities in other areas.”²⁸ The findings of this study do not reflect the disengaging process as universal in scope.

Because of these and other charges leveled against the disengagement theory, Cumming and Henry (and other adherents) were forced to defend their views when they were put in print. Additional time and study also caused these prominent figures to revise and restate their views. The following statement reveals the struggle especially for Cumming:

Almost from the instant it appeared, disengagement theory engendered a running controversy among social gerontologists. For the most part, criticisms tended to converge around the presumed inevitability and inherent nature of the process. Questions were also posed about the functionality of withdrawal from either the individual or societal standpoint, plus the apparent lack of attention to personality factors and their effect on the whole process (Maddox, 1964; Atchley, 1971). Even Cumming and Henry have expressed misgivings in separate revisions of their original formulation. In her further thoughts on the theory of disengagement, Cumming (1963) backed away from an emphasis on the societal equilibrium and prescribed behavior to concentrate instead on the role of innate biological and personality differences as distinct from externally imposed withdrawal. She no longer viewed societal pressures as sufficient to account for disengagement, though she did reiterate her contention that men and women would undergo sex-linked stylized adjustment. Responding to the theory's critics, Cumming adds a caveat regarding what she terms the *appearance*, contrasted

²⁶Ibid., 83.

²⁷Ibid., 63.

²⁸Palmore and Maddox, “Sociological Aspects of Aging,” 49.

to the *experience* of engagement. To those who would look simply at activity levels, Cumming suggests it is possible for disengaged people to appear involved, when in fact they are merely going through the motions of interaction, remaining oblivious to or simply shrugging off social sanctions on their behavior. The psychologically engaged, on the other hand, engrossed as they are in social intercourse, would still be responsive to feedback from others. At the same time, Cumming indicates a nascent attitudinal detachment, akin to a desocialization, may begin in middle age, far in advance of actual withdrawal and in the midst of what may for all intents and purposes look like the height of engagement.²⁹

The following statement reveals the struggle and change within Henry:

Henry (1965) also amended his initial view of the disengagement model to lay greater stress on psychological dynamics. Like Cumming, he agreed that they had not satisfactorily resolved all the questions of the process, but rather than focusing on innate temperamental variables, he chose instead to adopt a developmental approach. In essence, Henry's later statement is practically synonymous with the position propounded by Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin (1968), who also worked with the Kansas City data, but who arrived at a somewhat different conclusion from that originally implied by Cumming and Henry. . . . In Henry's restatement, the character of personality coping mechanisms and the focus on interiority are derived from previous experiences that determine the level of engagement or disengagement during subsequent stages of the life cycle. Those people who customarily have dealt with stress by turning inward and insulating themselves from the world will probably continue to manifest a pattern of withdrawal. At the same time, those who remain engaged are likely to have been similarly predisposed over the course of their lives. For this latter group, the nature of activities may change, but generally they will rely on their interaction to resist the centripetal movement inherent in the disengagement model. For all practical and theoretical purposes, Henry's revision of the kernel of disengagement theory can be read as an abandonment in favor of a more developmental approach.³⁰

Having identified the disengagement theory and its weaknesses, it is appropriate now to identify the activity theory and its weaknesses.

THE ACTIVITY THEORY OF AGING

Havighurst has said, "There is no doubt that disengagement does take place with aging, but proponents of the activity theory regard this as a result of society's withdrawal from the aging person against his will and desire. However, the disengagement theory stated by Cumming, Dean, Newell, and McCaffrey (1960) regards disengagement as a "natural process which the aging person accepts and desires."³¹ It is

²⁹Jon Hendricks and C. Davis Hendricks, *Dimensions of Aging: Readings* (Cambridge: Winthrop Publishers, 1979), 195.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 196.

³¹Robert J. Havighurst, "Successful Aging," in *Processes of Aging: Social and Psychological Perspectives*, 2 vols., ed. Richard H. Williams, Clark Tibbitts, and Wilma Donahue (New York: Atherton Press, 1963), 310.

noteworthy that the writers of the disengagement theory feel that the aging person will accept and desire the process of disengagement, particularly since Cumming and Henry acknowledge that “the aging people themselves are frustrated by decreased mobility and apparently subscribe to the activity value.”³²

The Components of the Theory

Some presumptions of the activity theory are that “it is better to be active than to be inactive” and “to maintain the patterns characteristic of middle age rather than to move to new patterns of old age.”³³ Another presumption is that restitution, in the form of compensatory activities, must take place. By keeping active, it is presumed people will remain “socially and psychologically fit.”³⁴ The proponents of this theory acknowledge that “disengagement theory may be applicable to a small minority of the elderly, usually the very old; but for the vast bulk of older people, the continuance of a moderately active lifestyle will have a marked preservative effect on their sense of well-being.”³⁵

Four postulates have been identified as “central” to activity theory:

First, the greater the role loss, the less the participation in activity. Second, as activity levels remain high, the greater the availability of role support for role identities claimed by the older person. Third, the stability of role support insures a stable self-concept. Finally, the more positive one’s self-concept, the greater the degree of life satisfaction. From these four propositions, six theorems were deduced that specify in detail the relationships implied by the theory.³⁶

Vern Bengtson states that two propositions are drawn from these four postulates: “The first is that there is a positive relationship between social activity and life satisfaction in old age. . . . The second proposition is that salient role loss (such as widowhood and retirement) is inversely related to life satisfaction.”³⁷ Jaber Gubrium adds a third proposition that “life satisfaction (‘adjustment’) results from the maintenance of active involvement in any number of work-like roles in old age.”³⁸

³²Cumming and Henry, *Growing Old*, 72.

³³Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin, “Disengagement and Patterns of Aging,” 161.

³⁴Hendricks and Hendricks, *Dimensions of Aging*, 196.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*, 197.

³⁷Bengtson, *Social Psychology of Aging*, 43.

³⁸Jaber F. Gubrium, *Time, Roles, and Self in Old Age*, 52.

Havighurst offers the following interesting observations about the popularity of the activity theory:

The activity theory is favored by most of the practical workers in gerontology. They believe that people should maintain the activities and attitudes of middle age as long as possible and then find substitutes for the activities which they must give up—for work when they are forced to retire, for clubs and associations, for friends and loved ones whom they lose by death.³⁹

The Weaknesses of the Theory

In spite of its popularity, the activity theory does have weaknesses. As a matter of fact, one writer indicated that the disengagement theory was “put forward to explain research findings which did not fit with the common American notion that old people continue to *want* the same level of social involvement that characterized their middle age.”⁴⁰ The maintenance of a level of high activity is not necessarily related to successful aging.⁴¹ A complex life style—one that involves “many roles and role behavior and a variety of activities”—produces happiness in middle age; but, among the oldest subjects, complex people seem to be “the least happy.” This finding may reflect, however, “the reduced opportunities for participation and self-expression that characterize old age in this society.”⁴² A significant possibility is that “it may not be the level of one’s activity that increases morale but that people whose adjustment is good tend to be more active, and those who are not well adjusted are less inclined to be active.”⁴³

Although advances in medical science and health practices, earlier retirement or release from child-care responsibilities, rising economic security and emotional level, an increasing number of organized activities and programs, and a new attitude toward leisure-time activities

³⁹Havighurst, “Successful Aging,” 309.

⁴⁰Christie W. Kiefer, “Lessons from the Issei,” in *Late Life: Communities and Environmental Policy*, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1974), 193-94.

⁴¹Bengtson, *Social Psychology of Aging*, 43.

⁴²Judith Stevens-Long, *Adult Life: Developmental Processes* (Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1979), 375-76.

⁴³Bernard Kutner, David Fanshel, Alice M. Togo, and Thomas S. Langner, “Factors Related to Adjustment in Old Age,” in *Psychological Studies of Human Development*, 2d ed., ed. Raymond G. Kuhlen and George G. Thompson (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), 600.

have led to greater opportunity for involvement in activity, the critical issue of activity is related more to participation levels in earlier stages of the life cycle.⁴⁴ Good adjustment is not a result of activity, but activity is more likely to be a result of good adjustment that has been typical of the individual's overall life style—not just of the aging years.

Another weakness is that “not only does the degree of participation change with age but attitudes toward participation also change. . . . Along with the decline in interest in club work, there was a decline in a feeling of satisfaction with leisure time in general. Among women in the early sixties, 47.7 per cent felt satisfied with their leisure-time activities; this percentage declines until, in the early nineties, only 28.6 per cent felt satisfied. The men show a similar, though less marked, change in attitudes.”⁴⁵

Another weakness of the activity theory has to do with the popularity and general acceptance of the theory without statistical evidence to validate its tenets. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, no data were available that gave “definitive support for the propositions to activity theory.”⁴⁶ It seems justified from such a statement to deduce that more effort was spent discrediting the disengagement theory than in validating the activity theory.

THE COMPLEMENTARY NATURE OF THE THEORIES

These two theories complement each other in that, where one is weak, the other is strong. Both taken together seem to cover most of the possible alternatives to aging. The following summary statement in a study conducted by Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin verifies the complementary nature of the two theories:

1. Our data provide convincing evidence of decline in both social and psychological engagement with increasing age. Disengagement seems to us to be a useful term by which to

⁴⁴E. Grant Youmans, “Some Perspectives on Disengagement Theory,” in *Let's Learn about Aging: A Book of Readings*, ed. John R. Barry and C. Ray Wingrove (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1977), 166.

⁴⁵Ruth S. Cavan, E. W. Burgess, R. J. Havighurst, and H. Holdhamer, “Social Participation and Personal Adjustment in Old Age,” in *Psychological Studies of Human Development*, 2d ed., ed. Raymond G. Kuhlen and George G. Thompson (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), 479-80.

⁴⁶Hendricks and Hendricks, *Dimensions of Aging*, 197.

describe these processes of change.

2. In some ways our data support the activity theory of optimal aging: as level of activity decreases, so also does the individual's feeling of contentment regarding his present activity.

3. At the same time, the data in some ways support the disengagement theory of optimal aging. The relationship between life satisfaction and present activity while positive, is only moderate, thus providing all four combinations of activity and life-satisfaction; high-high and low-low, but also high-low and low-high.

4. We conclude that neither the activity theory nor the disengagement theory of optimal aging is itself sufficient to account for what we regard as the more inclusive description of these findings: that as men and women move beyond age 70 in a modern, industrialized community like Kansas City, they regret the drop in role activity that occurs in their lives. At the same time, most older persons accept this drop as an inevitable accompaniment of growing old; and they succeed in maintaining a sense of self-worth and a sense of satisfaction with past and present life as a whole. Other older persons are less successful in resolving these conflicting elements—not only do they have strong negative affect regarding losses in activity; but the present losses weigh heavily, and are accompanied by a dissatisfaction with past and present life.

5. There appear to be two sets of values operating simultaneously, if not within the same individual then within the group we have been studying: on the one hand, the desire to stay active in order to maintain a sense of self-worth; on the other hand, the desire to withdraw from social commitments and to pursue a more leisurely and a more contemplative way of life. Neither the activity theory nor the disengagement theory of optimum aging takes sufficient account of this duality in value patterns.⁴⁷

It seems apparent that “life satisfaction will be positively related to activity for some people and to disengagement for others. A person with an active, achieving, and outward-directed way of life style will be best satisfied to continue this into old age with only slight diminution. Other people with a passive, dependent, home-centered way of life will be best satisfied with disengagement.”⁴⁸ Of course, the satisfaction one derives from his chosen life style may be altered by the environment, by heredity, and by personality. It is in the variation from that life style which has characterized their lives that there will be a marked change in satisfaction. Thus, those who have led an active life style throughout life will suffer loss of satisfaction in the loss of activity. Those who have led a rather sedentary life style throughout life will not experience such a severe loss of satisfaction as they live less active lives. However, if they are placed in an environment where they have to become more active, they may experience a loss of satisfaction because of the discomfort caused by the change in life style. Those who have been active will prefer the active life; those who have preferred the sedentary life will prefer disengagement.

⁴⁷Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin, “Disengagement and Patterns of Aging,” 171-72.

⁴⁸Havighurst, “Successful Aging,” 310-11.

In facing death itself, the aging people will take different approaches. Some will deny its reality, some will retreat from it out of anxiety, others will make attempts at mastery or resolution of it, and some will begin a life review.⁴⁹ Each of these approaches would fit into an activity-disengagement continuum; but, if one theory were espoused to the exclusion of the other, the approaches would not conveniently fit without much rationalizing. As the aging person approaches death, interest in religion may intensify. This interest may not be expressed in activity outside the home, however; for

frequent attendance at religious services is maintained fairly well until the eighties or nineties. Since listening to church services over the radio and reading the Bible increase, the total amount of religious activity tends to increase with age, right through the nineties. In view of the increase in favorable attitudes towards religion and in belief in an after-life, it may be assumed that the decline in activities outside the home is due to physical infirmities rather than to a decline in interest.⁵⁰

The diminished outward activity indicates a disengaged state, whereas the increased interest and commitment are more amenable to the activity theory. The mixed results seem to imply a practical marriage of the two theories; at least they are complementary in nature.

THE VARIOUS OFFSPRING OF THE THEORIES

The wedded bliss of opposites could only result in the birth of twins who are opposites. The sound and the fury over the espoused theories led to offspring of like minds. One offspring is the "spitting image" of his active father; the other is the mirror of her disengaged mother. The offspring that resembles the father has a personality problem. One view indicates that he has eight distinct personalities—re-organizer, focused, disengaged, holding on, constricted, succorance-seeker, apathetic, and disorganized.⁵¹ A second opinion has it that he only has five—mature,

⁴⁹Frances C. Jeffers and Adrian Verwoerd, "How the Old Face Death," in *Behavior and Adaptation in Late Life*, 2d ed., ed. Ewald W. Busse and Eric Pfeiffer (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), 39-42.

⁵⁰Cavan and others, "Social Participation and Personal Adjustment," 482.

⁵¹Havighurst, Neugarten, and Tobin, "Disengagement and Patterns of Aging," 173-77.

rocking-chair, armored, angry, self-hater.⁵² The various personality types that are identified can be traced to heredity. The other offspring has a social problem. One person indicates that her problem is that she is a part of a subculture—drawing ever closer to and more under the influence of those her own age, who may be attempting to organize in order to gain power.⁵³ A second opinion believes the problem is traceable to her environment and the range of interactions that are available. He also believes that a social breakdown is possible as a result of “negative feedback.”⁵⁴ A third opinion says she is a victim of age stratification, or age-grading. Because she is a certain age, certain things are expected of her; there is little room for variation or individualism, and she feels that her life has been largely restricted to “socially prescribed parameters.”⁵⁵

Obviously, these offspring have interesting characteristics, but they are all derived from the parents—directly or indirectly.

SOME POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE THEORIES

The following historical sketch should set the stage for this discussion:

The propagation of explicit explanatory models in social gerontology can be dated from the first tentative statement of disengagement theory published in 1960, and particularly from the appearance the next year of Cumming and Henry's *Growing Old* (Cumming et al., 1960; Cumming and Henry, 1961). In the following years, scores of criticisms and reformulations appeared, including separate revisions by the original authors, before the controversy over the applicability of the theory began to subside. Although the disengagement model has now been largely discredited, it remains an important milestone in the theoretical literature because of the attention it generated and its role in bringing forth competing perspectives (Hochschild, 1975). An implicit emphasis on active involvement on the part of the elderly as a means of sustaining high morale had been an undercurrent in gerontological discussions for years, but did not receive deliberate explication until after the disengagement notion had sensitized researchers to the value of presenting detailed paradigms.⁵⁶

The saga of disengagement theory began with a claim by Cumming and

⁵²Suzanne Reichard, Florine Livson, and Paul G. Petersen, “Adjustment to Retirement,” in *Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology*, ed. Bernice L. Neugarten (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 178-80.

⁵³Hendricks and Hendricks, *Dimensions of Aging*, 197-98.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 200-2.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 202-5.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 193.

Henry that all aging persons fit the theory (the universality principle of Postulate I).⁵⁷ A short time later the estimation of who fit the theory was revised to “experienced by many, perhaps most.”⁵⁸ More recent reports indicate that disengagement is only “for those who choose to disengage without being forced to do so.”⁵⁹ Some writers go so far as to say that “disengagement theory has been disproved and ought to be discarded,” except that it “comes up again and again and seems unlikely to be abandoned in the immediate future.”⁶⁰ Judith Stevens-Long writes,

A number of hypotheses about disengagement—the conditions under which it occurred and is adaptive—remain unexplored. Is disengagement an important developmental trend in societies that do not value productivity and activity as highly as they are valued in twentieth century America? Does disengagement occur in terms of the executive processes (the inner life) rather than primarily in social and role behavior? Is all disengagement a consequence of trauma or failing health? The case is not easily closed. All the evidence is not in.⁶¹

Richard Kalish takes a similar view when he says, “Clearly, the relative roles that disengagement and activity play in the later years (and, very likely, throughout the life span) are only beginning to come into focus. The importance of these roles makes this area a fruitful and necessary one for continued investigation, through both formal research and careful clinical observation.”⁶²

A final word concerning the future of these theories is that “no theory can be completely rejected, only disregarded in favor of those that offer a greater utility in the real world of the elderly. As the conditions affecting older people change, gerontologists must construct new models or renovate older ones if their explanations are to be of any scientific or social consequence.”⁶³

THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

David Moberg cites the “Background Paper on Spiritual Well-Being for the 1971 White House Conference on Aging” (which he also wrote),

⁵⁷Cumming and Henry, *Growing Old*, 211.

⁵⁸Jeremy Tunstall, *Old and Alone: A Sociological Study of Old Age*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 240.

⁵⁹Stevens-Long, *Adult Life*, 57.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., 374.

⁶²Kalish, *Late Adulthood*, 66.

⁶³Hendricks and Hendricks, *Dimensions of Aging*, 205-6.

a paper in which he identified six-vital areas of spiritual need among the aging that deserved special attention:

1. The aging need assistance for coping with the sociocultural sources of spiritual needs and for facing them realistically. Our culture is oriented toward youth, so aging is viewed as involving a series of losses. To cope successfully with these losses and the other problems of old age necessitates increased demands upon strong inner resources. Ageism, discrimination against the aging, is evident in nearly all areas of public life, including even religious institutions. Gerontophobia (Bunzel, 1969, 1972, 1973) is widespread, for people of all ages have a tendency to fear aging and to dislike the aged. Lack of respect for those who are elderly, viewing their knowledge and experience as out of date and irrelevant, is indigenous in contemporary society. Achievement tends to be measured by work; those who are retired are interpreted as no longer worthy of respect. Even religious institutions are oriented toward the future and thus remove a sense of security from many elderly people. As a result of these and other forms of discrimination and prejudice, society exacts a heavy toll of "spiritual fatigue" (Kowberle, 1969) among the aging. A sense of uselessness and rejection, inner emptiness and boredom, loneliness and fear emerges. The resolution of these needs constitutes a major spiritual task for contemporary society.
2. Anxiety and fears associated with losses that have been suffered and problems anticipated during the declining months and years of life constitute another spiritual need among the aging. "The care of souls" in relationship to these needs has been a traditional role of the clergy. Religious institutions have helped to meet these spiritual needs, providing comfort, love, sympathy, hope, assurance, and other forms of spiritual support.
3. Preparation for death and dying involves many material considerations, but ultimately it is a spiritual task. The interpretations of death have a significant impact upon the feelings and experiences associated with anticipated death, to say nothing of the experience of bereavement. The enhancement of spiritual well-being necessitates preparation for life during the remaining days, months, or years, as well as preparation for death itself (Feder, 1965, p. 622).
4. Personality integration is a spiritual need. It is related to every other aspect of well-being, and in turn it influences every other aspect. Major changes in self-concept occur with forced retirement, widowhood, changes in residence, removal from positions of leadership in social organizations, and other social changes commonly associated with the later period of the life cycle. Senility and other psychiatric disorders frequently are associated with the feelings of loneliness, being unwanted, loss of self-respect, sense of uselessness, insecurity, and other problems which result from changes in social roles and status. Satisfactory coping with these problems is a spiritual task.
5. Closely related to problems of personality integration is the blow to personal dignity that often afflicts the aging. Whether social disengagement is voluntary or involuntary, it is frequently associated with injuries to self-concepts. Pushed about by cultural forces that shove them aside like machines outmoded by more recent models, many elderly people are robbed of their self-determination and freedom of choice. Their dignity is diminished in their own eyes, as well as in the eyes of others, by conventional practices of our materialistic culture. The spiritual answer, accentuated most clearly by the Judeo-Christian religion that affirms the dignity of all human beings in its affirmation that man is created in the image of God, can help to restore a sense of personal worth.
6. The need to cultivate and strengthen a satisfactory philosophy of life is a spiritual necessity that cuts across all the others. Personal interpretations of the events of life and answers to such questions as "Who am I?," "Why am I?," and "What is the meaning of my life?" are at the center of this spiritual need. These lead into even deeper questions of the meaning of the universe and thus get to the heart of the problems which conventionally have been answered by man's religions. The competition of diverse religious, ideological, and philosophical perspectives in our pluralistic society accentuates the need to cope personally and directly with the basic questions of the meaning of human existence, for there is no universally accepted

resolution for them. Materialistic definitions of the situation become self-fulfilling prophecies of doom for many elderly people. Hope for the immediate and distant future or the loss of it constitutes a central key element. A satisfactory resolution of the problem of one's *Weltanschauung* provides stability in the midst of the confusions resulting from rapid social change and the personal deprivations associated with aging, including the removal of familiar landmarks by which life has been oriented in the past.⁶⁴

Several recommendations as to how to help the aged have been offered by various writers. Vern Bengtson indicates that workers with the aged must seek "to liberate the individual from an age-inappropriate view of status," to "urge the older person to adopt a more 'humanitarian' frame of self-judgment," to enhance "adaptive capacity by lessening the debilitating environmental conditions faced by most older people, such as poor health, and poverty," and to encourage "self-determination by the elderly and individual control of policy and administration."⁶⁵ Moberg, himself, encourages the establishing of chaplaincy services that are coordinated with other professional care workers in the total care institutions. He further recommends that printed and audiovisual materials should be made easily accessible in these locations.⁶⁶

A decreased church attendance among older people is offset by an increased interest in religious programs carried via radio and television, indicating a need for increased use of such media by churches.⁶⁷ This decrease in out-of-home activities indicates that the offering of a number of activities for the aged may not result in a successful adult program, as may be generally assumed.⁶⁸ Even more discouraging is the possibility that only the well-adjusted person is "inclined to be active," as opposed to the idea that activity will lead to better adjustment.⁶⁹ Therefore, the urgent need is for the adult Christian education program to emphasize "helping the aged to adjust and have satisfying lives" and then seek to "foster the general development of more useful and meaningful roles for the aged by encouraging them to maintain high levels of employment,

⁶⁴David O. Moberg, "Spiritual Well-Being in Late Life," in *Late Life: Communities and Environmental Policy*, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1974), 261-63.

⁶⁵Bengtson, *Social Psychology of Aging*, 49.

⁶⁶Moberg, "Spiritual Well-Being in Late Life," 273.

⁶⁷David O. Moberg, "Religiosity in Old Age," in *Let's Learn about Aging: A Book of Readings*, ed. John R. Barry and C. Ray Wingrove (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1977), 213.

⁶⁸Bengtson, *Social Psychology of Aging*, 43.

⁶⁹Kutner and others, "Factors Related to Adjustment," 600.

join organizations, contact friends and relatives often, and develop skills, crafts, and hobbies.”⁷⁰

The church must not forget that “spiritual growth is never complete in this life” and that “even the most religious among the elderly can develop still more spiritually by cultivating their spiritual well-being. Late life can be a period of significant spiritual growth; for many it represents a major developmental stage of the spiritual life cycle.”⁷¹ In light of this possibility, the words of Robert Browning’s Rabbi Ben Ezra may yet prove to be true:

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

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⁷⁰Palmore and Maddox, “Sociological Aspects of Aging,” 50.

⁷¹Moberg, “Spiritual Well-Being in Late Life,” 276.

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