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INTRODUCTION. The Ends of Life: Time and Meaning in Later Years

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How do ideas of meaning in life take shape or come into focus as people approach their final days? Though often conceptualised in terms of decline or loss, older age can nevertheless bring new opportunities for meaningful reflection, or the attainment of a new perspective on one's life and that which lends it a sense of meaning or purpose. Approaching the end of life throws into sharp relief the very idea of a future: the experience of time takes on a different form when one's life is not seen as extending very far ahead. If hope is a prospective temporal orientation, then, what shape does it take as one approaches death? Furthermore, death is not always seen to constitute the ultimate end of life, given the importance placed on ideas of continuity or transcendence, and a range of possible understandings of finality. Drawing on the idea of 'ends of life,' both in the sense of temporal proximity to death and in the sense of an end as a purpose, this special issue explores ideas of temporality and the future as well as meaning, purpose and fulfilment in our later years.

Death has an ambiguous relationship to meaning in life: on the one hand, death can be seen as delimiting and framing life and thus imbuing it with meaning. A good life, argued Aristotle, can only be judged as a whole: a person can only be deemed to have led a happy (which is to say, virtuous) life once it is complete. For some people, approaching the end certainly does prompt reflection upon the life lived. And yet death and its approach are not infrequently seen as meaningless, or as throwing lives into disarray. "Every day we die," a middle-aged Palestinian man in a refugee camp in Lebanon told the anthropologist Illana Feldman (2017, 59). For these men for whom death was more like a bad companion, "living with dying in mind" turned out to be problematic, even pathological, as it unfolded within a humanitarian regime focused on the preservation of life but riddled with insufficient resources for care (2017, 44). A sense of meaninglessness in this troubled existence was pervasive and seen as itself a form of death that stretched across the life course.¹

Ends of life

I borrowed the phrase 'ends of life' from the historian Keith Thomas, whose book (subtitled *Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England*) examined the particular pursuits that people in this milieu considered most worthwhile, or most apt in orienting them towards a life well lived: work; wealth; military prowess; reputation; personal relationships; and the afterlife (2009, 1). In Thomas's sense, the ends of life comprise particular aims in life, or avenues towards a life worth living. Such concerns often come to the fore as people move through their lives, as they age. Approaching the end of life throws into sharp relief the very idea of a future: the experience of time takes on a different form when one's life is not seen as extending very far ahead. Drawing on the idea of 'ends of life' in both these senses, then - both in the sense of temporal proximity to death, and in the sense of an end or a purpose - this special issue explores ideas of temporality and the future alongside meaning, purpose and fulfilment as these play out in the later years.

For the residents of Withuis, the nursing home in South Africa described by Casey Golomski in this volume, facing death catalysed considerations of the mystical, of divine presence. As many of their peers passed away, the residents and the staff were prompted to reflect on death and the process of dying itself. In this way Golomski's contribution places the final stage of life, death, and what comes after death in a meaningful and temporal sequence, focusing on the conceptual pair of imminence and immanence: the immanence of God in the context of imminent death (Golomski, this issue). The Scottish elders described by Jane Elliott and JD Carpentieri strove for a meaningful life story that presented their aging as successful. Elliott and Carpentieri use the concept of generativity to explore the growth and expansion of capacities that persons can undergo at any stage of their life, including the end. Using a biographical-narrative approach, they point to the prevalence of discussions of the past in the accounts of elders, largely to highlight the 'stoical' selves who remain 'in control' (Elliott and Carpentieri, this issue). While these narratives did not dwell on the future or the final days, these elders often planned for their death and made funeral arrangements, even while the uncertainty of the final days made this a difficult topic to broach.

Emily Wentzell's interlocutors in Mexico made efforts to 'age well' by involving themselves in community health programmes, seeing this as a way to contribute to wellbeing in communities, and in the process linked their own bodies to a national body beyond themselves. Their hopes to age in an admirable way could be seen as part of a moral project of improving the lives of others, not least by modelling what living well in later life might look like. Aging and moving towards the end of life is explicitly portrayed here as embodied: one's own bodily practices were seen to affect the broader collective 'biology' (Wentzell, this issue). Susan Long in this volume focuses on what mattered most to her Japanese interlocutors and their families in their last phase of life, their moral projects underpinned by attempts to be good, 'steadfast' and 'reliable.' A dying person here is not only one approaching death, but also one who is still alive, in a final stage of life. A good person in death is able to reflect on his or her relationships and to reciprocate care by expressing thanks. Gratitude, for Japanese elders, can be understood not merely as a form of evaluation of the past, but also as offering hope in the present (Kavedžija, this issue).

On flow and punctuation: Time, temporality and life course

Time, as we experience it, is far from "like an ever rolling stream" as Isaac Watts described it—or, if like a stream, it is far more varied than the simile suggests, sometimes wide and placid and slow-moving, sometimes racing through narrow gorges, sometimes scattered with boulders. There are landmarks and turning points along the way. The pace changes. (Bateson 2011, 38)

The slow treacle of waiting, or hours simply vanishing engrossed in a favourite activity – these changes in the pace of subjective time are familiar to most of us. At different points in life, time flows differently. The experience of time is profoundly subjective, but it does not remain unaffected by what happens around us, not least because it is framed in shared and familiar terms: hours, years, seasons, and all the other kinds of time-maps and ideas that people have devised to navigate time (Gell 1992). Different groups and people use different time-maps at the same time. The temporalities resting on these time-maps coexist and at times they come into tension or clash. The productive time of a mother's capitalist workplace might clash with her baby's nursing rhythm. Not everyone has the same degree of control over their time, its organization or framing, or their temporal resources. To understand this, Laura Bear (2014) calls for a Marxist perspective, highlighting that not all time-maps and temporalities are equal – some are more influential, more powerful than others.

The passing of time also means moving through life: the experience of time's flow and the life course are intimately intertwined. Lives can be structured, even organized into life stages, and the flow of time in life may be perceived as unfolding in chapters, in eras, or as punctuated by events (Bateson 2011, 39). Life stages are not always stable, static, or everywhere alike. When they are discernible, they are best understood as emerging from particular social and institutional frameworks (Johnson-Hanks 2002). As these circumstances and frameworks change, however, the life course itself might undergo transitions. In places marked by apparently high levels of uncertainty and change, such as Cameroon, the life course is not structured into coherent and demarcated stages. Giving birth, for instance, does not entail moving into full adulthood or motherhood, as young girls might continue their education while their family takes on the role of parenting the baby. In this sense, particular statuses may be occupied temporarily and in no set order. In some places, one of the most notable life course changes stems from increased longevity and a longer period of maturity. This has led Mary Catherine Bateson (2011) to propose that mature life in the context of industrialized societies might usefully be considered as comprising two phases - Adulthood I and Adulthood II – insofar as longevity has increased and expectations surrounding older age have undergone change. In this sense, as the lifespan extends, Bateson argues that a new life stage follows adulthood and precedes senescence.² What older age brings as a life stage is itself undergoing a transition, just as a large cohort of baby boomers is moving slowly towards senescence.

Older age, then, is structured and punctuated in myriad different ways across time and space. Kao and Albert (2020, 120) have proposed the concept of “elderscapes,” figured as institutional and cultural landscapes of aging, populated with imaginings and relationships. As people move through the geography of age their vantage point changes also. The spatio-temporal aspect of the elderscape metaphor emphasizes the temporal agency of individuals and groups. And yet, most do not simply move forward along a delineated trajectory, or march decisively into the sunset. The uncertain, shifting terrain complicates matters further: as people move through life, the circumstances around them change, along with ideas about what the future might hold. This elderscape itself also shifts, flows and undulates, however, as the actors navigate through time. In developing his concept of “social navigation,” Henrik Vigh (2009) stressed that the original sense of the word ‘navigation’ involved movement on the unstable surface of the sea. When moving through life, actors cannot presume that their circumstances will remain unchanged, particularly in times of uncertainty and crisis. And so, actors move through an environment that is itself constantly changing. Elderscapes, I would suggest, are similarly best understood as fluid and shifting environments, such that moving through them demands a form of navigation, if one is to avoid all the hidden obstacles or shallows. As people move through elderscapes, moving towards a horizon, the landscape around them changes – the circumstances, expectations, and norms do not always remain stable.

If the life course does not always follow neatly organized stages, is it then better understood as organized around events? Certain historical events are obviously of major significance in a general sense, linking many lives together, but biographies are often punctuated by apparently quite minor and intimate moments that are nevertheless no less important for understanding living, dying and suffering. These might be likened to that Povinelli (2011) calls “quasi-events,” which, she suggests, are “ordinary, chronic, and cruddy rather than catastrophic, crisis- laden, and sublime. . . . If events are things that we can say happened such that they have a certain objective being, then quasi-events never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place” (2011, 13). In the context of older age and of our investigations of peoples’ biographies and life stories, events and quasi-events all add punctuation of one kind or another to the flow of the narrative. Such a movement through time further recalls the concept of chronicity, as deployed in medical anthropology in order to foreground narratives of the

lived experience of chronic illness (e.g., Smith–Morris 2010, 25). Chronic, of course, refers here to the enduring, temporal character of the condition with which one must live.

Experiences of time in older age

. . . finally, there is the premonition that our future will not follow in an orderly way from our present any more than our present has from our past, which precedes but escapes it. In short, exactly the opposite of a curriculum vitae or a career plan, and sometimes the shadow of a doubt about our singular, individual identity (Augé 2016, 22)

Temporalities in older age are often institutionally framed, particularly when playing out within care homes, nursing homes or hospices. These contexts imply specific time-structuring processes, some of which are focused on the past, and its reconstruction through narrative, while others focus on the future or the present. The latter is sometimes seen as extending in a timeless way, the passage of time arrested: ‘limbo time’ (Laird 1979; Golander 1995). Evaluations of youth and older age in particular cultural configurations of aging moreover powerfully intersect with the managerial regimes deployed within healthcare systems. In the context of Medicare in the United States, the dominant temporality may be one of anticipation, oriented around diagnoses and predictions of longevity. This correlates with attempts to grow old while remaining healthy and not only to predict the time remaining, but also to extend it (Kaufman and Fjord 2011, 209).

The progress of aging itself is framed by many different cultural expectations and discourses. It may involve a rapid or slow deterioration, or one that should be managed, postponed or prevented, as in the ‘active aging’ and ‘successful aging’ paradigms (see Lamb 2017; Katz and Calasanti 2015). Aging ‘actively’ is sometimes seen as a commitment to the wider community: taking care of oneself is itself a contribution to improving the national body (Traphagan 2000; Wentzell, this issue). Successful aging, a predominant model for moving through the later years in the United States, favours so-called ‘ageless’ ageing: active and engaged (Lamb 2017, 234). The resources for success are, of course, not equally available to everyone, and many may feel left behind. By contrast, the progress of time as one nears the end might in some cases be seen as a process of disentanglement and detachment (Desjarlais 2016, 654), of putting affairs in order, of expressing thanks (Long, this issue), or inhabiting the moment through gratitude (Kavedžija, this issue).

Older age might cast the future as a domain of uncertainty, shrouding the transition between life and death in ‘mystery’ (Golomski, this issue). Death figures as a certainty for which arrangements must be made (Elliot, this issue), but also as an unknown, an ontological horizon. While culturally constructed knowledge of what death will bring can be quite elaborate, and while rituals provide structure for those who remain, the personal experience of death remains unknown, even unknowable. Death can be paradigmatic of liminality (Berger 2016), and as such may be viewed as a transition that is both dangerous and generative. In this sense, the end of a life is not altogether unlike the end of the world – unknown.

Terminal hope

When the future appears inaccessible or is somehow blocked (e.g., in depression or death anxiety), hope necessarily disappears and life loses meaning. (Rappaport *et al.* 1993, 371)

If what lies ahead is seen as inaccessible, as can happen in the context of death anxiety (see Rappaport *et al.* 1993), this might be figured as the loss of a future. In fact, older age is often marked by various

forms of loss (e.g., Danely 2015): one's consociates or significant others; of a way of life; of bodily capacities and abilities. At times, the future might itself seem inaccessible, lost. This immense loss can give rise to grief, perhaps even requiring bereavement counselling (see Chatterji 2016, 700). How to imagine a future at the end of life? While people everywhere know a great deal *about* death, in one way or another, precise knowledge of death is impossible, and death is unimaginable (Lambek 2016, 630).

As the Crow people of North America confronted the inevitable end of their way of life as they knew it (buffalo hunting was no longer possible and most of their other activities and roles seemed deeply entwined with it), their chief Plenty Coups expressed his hope that something good will nevertheless ensue, a good not yet knowable or even imaginable from the current Crow perspective. This is what Jonathan Lear characterised as radical hope: "Plenty Coups responded to the collapse of his civilization with radical hope. What makes his hope radical is that it is directed toward future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have hope as yet lack appropriate concepts with which to understand what it is. . . . [In this sense] the Crow hoped for the emergence of a Crow subjectivity that did not yet exist" (Lear 2006, 103-104). What form does hope take, we might well ask, at the end of life? Terminal hope is perhaps the quintessential radical hope, oriented towards the total unknown, while remaining open to the good.

Death may be the end of life but does not stand in opposition to it. As Lambek reminds us: "The culmination of life is surely death, and the only way to make sense of death is surely life. They are two sides of a coin, and in fact literal coins are frequently what are placed in the mouths of the deceased, ready to help them make the passage, either from this life to an afterlife, or from death back to life. Without life there could be no death. Without death there could be no life. Death and life are the mutual conditions for one another." (Lambek 2016, 634). Death is certain, yet unknowable. This ambiguity is captured by Jackson in his discussion of the penumbral - "all human experience remains ambiguous, containing within it both the seeds of its own comprehensibility and nuances and shadings that go beyond what can be comprehensively thought or said" (Jackson 2016, 451). Such ambiguity can be a source of uncertainty, leading to anxiety, but can also be open, making space for hope. By definition, hope reaches out towards the unknown (cf. Bloch 1986), and even though forward oriented, might not entirely be at odds with the approaching end of life. Death delimits but also contains life and holds it together.

Endscapes

How does it feel, to approach death? How do people navigate social relationships, time, and uncertainty in this period? Such a profoundly intimate experience may be difficult to communicate, or put into words (see Chatterji 2016), but it can also be watched, witnessed, accompanied. Green writes of various 'exit strategies' that people employ, suggesting that death is not a momentary occurrence but rather a process: "We all die a bit every day just to keep ourselves alive, but not all of us do so at the same rate" (2008, 45). Among Yolmo Buddhists, death is viewed as a creative process, Desjarlais argues – an act of poiesis. While it involves gradual disentanglement and detachment, this is precisely why it also involves others: "Dying often emerges as an active, conscious project in life, as an action to be undertaken. A person strives, often with the help of others, to create the conditions whereby she can contribute to the creative subtraction of her place within the world" (Desjarlais 2016, 654).

The aim of this volume is to add to the literature on older age and life course by attending carefully to the period of facing death and approaching the end as a particular part of a life. Scholars of the contemporary hospice movement suggest that approaching death requires coming to terms with the finitude of life (see Kübler-Ross 1969). For residents of the South African care home, the imminence of death was joined with the process of getting used to death, of living with it. Here, the endscape spanned

the time of approaching death, as well as what came after it, extending into the unknown: ‘yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery’ (Golomski, this issue). The endscape for the Scottish elders described by Elliott and Carpentieri in this volume seemed to allow and even demand some degree of futurizing and planning, but the bodily changes and decline were also often conjoined with stoicism. The endscape for the relatively young Mexican elders extends far into the future, where their own bodily practices are seen to affect the national body, with its own temporality (see Wentzell, this issue). In Japan, too, the endscape opens up towards others (Long, this issue; Kavedžija, this issue), with these vital relationships extending beyond the horizon.

Writing about his own experience of nearing the end of life, the psychoanalyst Stanley Leavy (2011) suggested that this final stage of ‘meanwhile’ allowed for a certain freedom, a release from earlier statuses and expectations. He argues that thinking of the openness of the time in this ‘meanwhile,’ and some of the limitations that people might experience as they approach their final days, lend a special quality to the ‘last of life.’ Discussions of older age in predominantly negative terms, as a time of loss and frailty, or in overly positive terms, as a time of active involvement, equally neglect the possibility that this is a novel and productive time that offers something new and specific due precisely to its limitation: “that it may be unique, new, fresh, and that its benefits exist not in spite of physical and mental limitations, but joined with them” (Leavy 2011, 708). The contributions herein hopefully go some way towards investigating the particular challenges, but also the promise, that the ends of life can hold in store. They invite us to reflect on the diversity of human endscales, those fluid terrains of meaning that all must navigate.

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Notes

1. ‘Living with death’ is not necessarily desperate or meaningless – the presence of loss provided a source for meaning in life for her interlocutors in New Mexico’s Espanola Valley ‘living-with-death’ is seen as a source of natality for kin who care for one another, in a context in which loss produces a connective tissue between the past and the future (Garcia 2016, 316).
2. Social gerontologists similarly question the homogeneity of the ‘older age’, with some making a distinction between ‘the third age’ and ‘the fourth age’ (Gilleard and Higgs 2010).

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