Chapter 18

The Self-Cultivation Model of Lifelong Learning: Toward Post-Egoic Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter takes the prevailing anti-aging sentiment and cultural practice as the starting point of a critical analysis and shows that the modernist worldview of materialistic individualism is at their foundation. Exposing and critiquing the limiting deficit understanding of human aging and human development in this worldview, the authors propose a developmental model that moves beyond materialistic individualism and egoic development and sees human beings becoming progressively integrated into larger and larger circles of being that include not only human others but also non-human others such as Nature and Cosmos. This wider and holistic vision of human development is influenced by classical Asian philosophies that posit post-egoic notions of human being. Using biographical materials to identify the themes relevant to post-egoic development, the authors sketch a model of lifelong learning and growth with what they see as essential elements of such growth: secure bonding and connection, nurturance and nourishing, spirituality, self-cultivation and inner work, community development, virtue cultivation, healing, meditation, and contemplative practices.

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PRELUDE

In the current culture, we are inundated with sad, lonely, dispirited, desperate, and even frightening images of aging. For sure, the Market is making good use of these negative images of aging. Everywhere anti-aging is introduced and touted as perhaps the “final frontier” of human conquest. All manner of products, particularly for beauty and personal care, are offered to those who have sufficient funds to purchase, and then engage in a “life and death” struggle with what seems like the final insult to human dignity and supremacy: aging and death. But the far more painful scenes of aging are the ordinary folks everywhere who are growing old, and being discarded, neglected, forgotten, rendered useless, alone, and unloved. As well, as a population, the aging and the aged are not infrequently at and below the margins of poverty. These people are everywhere: in our neighborhoods, on park and sidewalk benches, sitting or lying on the sidewalks of the city, and, of course, in care homes. And, might we add, they are frequently in our own homes.

We mostly take these scenes for granted, inasmuch as we feel badly and walk by with a sigh, all the while wondering when our own turn to be part of that scene will come. Our sense, as the authors of this chapter, is that we take these scenes for granted only because we have become part of the enculturated helplessness and numbing associated with this particular picture of aging, which, of course, is also only one aspect of an increasing tendency towards a cultivated helplessness and actual psychic numbing (Vetlesen, 1993) in the service of survival in the highly competitive postmodern era. For sure, we all participate and are complicit in creating the scenes described above.

Certainly it is not just the North American propensity to dread aging, nor a modern habit of mind to be unhappy about aging. 2,500 years ago, the youthful Buddha, when he emerged from the sequestered environment of the palace in Northern India that his father had carefully constructed, was shocked and profoundly disturbed when he realized all humans faced the darker realities of life: sickness, aging, and eventual death. The ancient Daoists were also very interested in aging and death, and sought out immortality practices (Kohn, 2000). A closer look, however, at these practices and the philosophy tells us that the seeking of immortality was really about living fully and to an optimal age. It would seem that the focus on immortality was in the service of developing human possibilities through various practices and arts, including herbal remedies, physical practices, wu-wei (“no effort,” meaning no forced effort) philosophy that cultivated an ability to follow the ways of nature, subtle leadership, circulation of qi (qi in Chinese and ki in Japanese and Korean), or vital energy throughout the body, and learning how to connect with the universal qi and feel its connection with the qi processes within.

Speaking comparatively in terms of culture, the pervasive irreverence towards aging and the devaluing of the aged that tend to characterize North American culture is, in our view, something rather unique in human history. We propose that this irreverence and devaluation comes about because our mainstream culture tends to uncritically transmit a notion of human development that has a deficit view of aging. While it is clear that this deficit model has been critiqued for some time, it is also clear that this message has not reached the public. The point of our chapter, and of this book, is to attempt to address this lack of awareness and practice. In particular, our chapter addresses this by offering a new and radical view about the practice and life of anyone who is, or wishes to be, a life-long learner.

We, the authors of this chapter, have opened ourselves to a vision quest in which we can imagine and enact different possibilities of meaning-making with respect to human aging. Can aging be seen