The Older Learner’s Journey to an Ageless Society
Lifelong Learning on the Brink of a Crisis

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Although educational programs for midlife and older learners may seem unrelated to social ideologies about aging, work, retirement, and the economy, nothing could be further from the truth. Following the older learner’s path through a 70-year journey starting in the 1950s and ending in a projected year 2020 reveals correlations between theories of aging, rationales for older learner programs, and changes in public policy regarding retirement, social and health care insurance, and other age-based entitlement programs and social policies (mainly in North America but also with reference to other countries). If, as is asserted here, we are on the verge of an age-irrelevant society, then these lifelong learning programs hover on the brink of a crisis that may or may not be averted.

Keywords: lifelong learning; age-irrelevant society; philosophical presuppositions; theories of aging; rationales for older learner programs

Lecturing at the Sorbonne in 1902, the pioneering French sociologist Emile Durkheim told his students, “Education is above all the means by which society perpetually recreates the conditions of its very existence” (Durkheim, 1956, p. 123). No educational system would intentionally support curricula or forms of pedagogy that might lead to its own demise, Durkheim explained to these future teachers, because “our pedagogic ideal is explained by our social structure” (p. 122). Whether publicly or privately sponsored, education is consonant with the society’s predominant values. However, insisted Durkheim, when these change, then education must also change.

Durkheim’s observation may seem self-evident when we consider, for example, the impact on American education of the Russian Sputnik launch in 1957. Suddenly, leaders in government and education announced that unless dramatic improvements were made in the quality and quantity of science education, the

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198

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United States would lose not only the space race but also the Cold War. And think about how school subjects like mid-20th-century European history, evolutionary biology, or comparative religion are taught in schools in, say, Germany or Texas or Beirut. Although education aims to help the individual realize his or her potential, it does so in the context of a particular historical and cultural setting.

The connection between curriculum, pedagogy, and ideology (dominant political ideals wrapped in social doctrine and cultural values) might not seem applicable to continuing education for older adults. After all, participation is voluntary, mature students' patriotism and sense of right and wrong are already developed, and their role in sustaining the economy and its competitive edge has usually shifted from one of producer-consumer to mainly that of consumer. Given the innocuous nature of educational programs for older learners, we might not expect public and private institutions that host them to be influenced by the prevailing ideology of our society. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

The cultural weave of rationales supporting educational opportunities for older citizens, theories of aging, and social attitudes reflected in public policy forms a close-knit fabric that is usually only examined in its separate threads. But if the thesis advanced in this essay is credible—that because of major shifts in cultural ideology, lifelong learning programs for older adults are in the midst of a crisis of both identity and existence—then studying the weave of threads is crucial.

By following the older learner's path through recent developments in lifelong learning, I aim to show linkages between theories of aging, rationales for older learner programs, and concurrent changes in public policy regarding retirement, social and health care insurance, and other age-based entitlement programs and social policies (mainly in the United States but with reference to developments elsewhere). Our 70-year journey unfolds in four sections by (a) tracing the remarkable emergence of older learner programs in the nascent period, 1950 to 1985; (b) following the stabilizing and expansion of these programs over the next 20-year period to the time of this writing, 1985 to 2005; (c) extending this analysis by projecting current trends to the year 2020, thus encompassing an additional 15-year period during which the large cohort of post–World War II–born individuals will enter a phase of decision making about work, retirement, use and availability of discretionary time and money, and continued learning; and (d) returning to an important distinction in Durkheim's theory that may help us to better assess the road ahead.

By understanding the dynamic interplay of theories, policies, and rationales, those who are volunteer and professional leaders in the field of lifelong learning may better recognize the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. For others whose profession it is to study the trends of an aging society, a sojourn through the byways of lifelong learning may add another dimension to the conversations about health care, social insurance, and pension policy.
The Awakening: 1950 to 1985

In 1976, the first number of a brand-new journal, *Educational Gerontology*, contained an essay by Harry R. Moody entitled "Philosophical Presuppositions of Older Adult Education" (Moody, 1976). Moody proposed a taxonomy to capture the underlying assumptions about aging and the elderly that influenced then-emerging programs for older learners. He identified four "presuppositions" or stances toward the needs of older adults: (a) rejection—that older adults had little or no need for educational opportunities; (b) adaptation—they have a need, mainly to ameliorate the isolation and purposelessness of postretirement life; (c) assimilation—that the adjustment needs of retirement-aged individuals could be met through mainstreaming them into existing educational programs such as in public colleges and universities (tuition-free, space-available policies); and (d) self-actualization—that developmentally, later life presents a unique time for learning that, in turn, can nurture further moral and intellectual growth. Moody brought his philosophical training to bear on the fourth supposition, citing the likes of Plato, C. G. Jung, and Erik Erikson, who implied or asserted that the second half of life signaled a time for the cultivation of inner wisdom and self-integration.

In the tradition of Durkheim, Moody’s insightful essay revealed linkages between social attitudes toward and theories of aging and the implied purposes of organized educational programs for older adults. The first supposition that older people had little or no need for further education reflected the “disengagement” theory that emerged from the Kansas City Study of Adult Life conducted in the late 1950s (Cumming & Henry, 1961). The study concluded that as people reached what was then becoming the conventional retirement age, nominally 65, they underwent a gradual and mutual process of social withdrawal or disengagement. Older people, the study claimed, realized that their importance to society was ebbing and that their purpose lay more in inward reflection on life and preparation for death than in keeping up with the hubbub of daily affairs.

The Kansas City study served more as an epitaph for how old age had been socially regarded and widely reinforced prior to the middle of the 20th century. Immediately, other social scientists and advocates for the elderly attacked the theory, arguing that the disengagement process was neither natural nor voluntary; rather, it was the result of old age stereotypes and of social policies that pushed people out of the workforce at an arbitrary age, rendering them useless and impotent, and forcing them to the periphery of society. Exactly the opposite should be happening, they advocated. Older people should be encouraged to participate in enlivening educational, cultural, and recreational activities that would keep them socially involved. Although these advocates might have proposed the more logically named “engagement” theory, somehow the field ended up with the prosaic “activity theory” of aging (Havighurst, 1963).
Disengagement and activity were really not theories of aging in the same sense as those advanced by biologists to describe, say, the role of genetic material in the process of cellular aging or how the human immune system is gradually compromised. As a social theory, disengagement was intended to be merely descriptive of what is (or, at least, was), whereas activity theory seems more prescriptive of what should be if society were freed from prejudices and ignorance about growing old. But at the time when these two theories were first contending with each other, social theorists and advocates really did seem to believe that they were arguing over what was intrinsic, universal, and natural about aging in society. Disengagement theory may not seem normative because it was simply trying to describe a natural, social process, yet the theory did confer an ideal of graceful aging on an older, inward-looking person. Activity theory clearly championed new roles and a new identity for the older citizen.

Moody's point about the "rejection" rationale captures attitudes toward aging and the elderly through the post-World War II years. Until the early 1950s, preoccupation with the burgeoning youth culture (today's baby boomers) and medical research focusing on cognitive decline in later life inhibited the growth of educational programs for older adults. There was, however, a glimmer of interest emanating from a newly formed committee on Education for Aging that became part of the National Education Association (NEA) in 1951. The committee produced the first descriptive book on educational programs in which older adult learners could participate, *Education for Later Maturity: A Handbook* (Donahue, 1955).

By the early 1960s, the impact of longer life expectancy and steady decline in the average age of retirement in the United States yielded noticeable growth in the population of retired citizens. This, along with the mandates of the Johnson administration's "Great Society," prompted a new view of later life. Seniors needed the knowledge and skills to cope successfully with the problematic aspects of growing older. According to one of the forerunners in older adult education, David Peterson (1983), "Educational programs emphasized the crisis of adjustment to retirement and the need for outside assistance to overcome the trauma of role change" (p. 219). This approach corresponded to what Moody (1985) would later characterize as the "social service" model of older adult education. Another common and related rationale of the period was that continued mental stimulation in the context of social learning would "help prevent premature institutionalization."

When, in the 1970s, the "normalization" movement brought the mass exodus of thousands of patients from mental hospitals across America, discharging them to the newly established community-based care network of mental health centers, a parallel "mainstreaming" attempt occurred in the realm of older adult education. Some 39 state legislatures enacted bills to allow people over age 65 (or 62, depending on the state) to enroll, tuition-free, in public colleges and universities as space permitted. Rather than segregating older people, argued advocates, our society should be finding ways to integrate them with other generations. In most
cases, this legislation was gratuitous because no funding was attached. Consequently, most colleges and universities did little to publicize the mandated opportunity and few of the empty seats were taken. There were, however, a few notable exceptions. Because of undergraduate enrollment shortfalls of the period, several universities such as Syracuse and Western Washington State University actually established dorm space for senior housing on the campus and (notably at Western Washington State University’s Fairhaven College) promoted intergenerational learning opportunities (Weinstock, 1978). However, these experiments were short lived. In contrast, many community college systems did find state funds available to partner with senior centers to deliver classes on site. This innovative model lasted perhaps a decade until economic pressures and the demands of other “ needy” groups (e.g., immigrants, Vietnam veterans, women returning to school) gradually squeezed out these programs.

Cross-fertilization between scholars and researchers who advocated the value of education as a catalyst promoting development in later life (the “humanistic gerontology” school), and innovative leaders in adult education such as Malcolm Knowles (1984), whose term “andragogy” highlighted the uniqueness of adult learner-centered education, generated the radically new view that older learner programs could serve as engines of lifelong development and even, as we will see, of social change (Manheimer, Snodgrass, & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995). Extending traditional psychological developmental life stage theories into new, uncharted, territory, these programs would reflect the claim that growth did not end with the consummation of adolescence.

The names of the new older learner programs of this period reflected the shift in assumptions by playing on the irony of substitution. So from Youth Hostel came Elderhostel, the low-cost, travel-learning program for people over age 55 that was launched in 1975. These 1-week-long summer stays in Spartan college dorms, and journeys through the halls of ivy, would eventually lead to a huge, year-round, international program in which “elder” hostellers would have experiences usually reserved for “youth.” Similar substitutions of age for youth produced senior colleges, Gray Panthers, adult day care center, senior centers, even drama groups like Autumn Players, and later the federal program, Senior Corps. The fresh nomenclature challenged the myth of disengaged seniors and replaced it with an image of the active, if not youthful, and certainly resourceful, older person. After several decades, the names would no longer convey the same element of surprise, which is why, as we will see, organizations started to discard or modify them in the 1990s.

The huge wave of legislation that grew out of the Great Society mandates also produced the Older Americans Act of 1965, which allocated funding for the proliferation of multipurpose senior centers across the United States. And with these centers came the growth of recreational and informational education. At first, hobbies-oriented activities, exercise classes, musical choruses, dancing, bingo, occasional presentations on healthful nutrition, access to social services, or how to deal with losses predominated. Gradually, education in senior centers embraced
intellectually and culturally challenging classes. These were further enhanced starting in 1976 through availability of the National Council on the Aging's (NCOA) Senior Center Humanities Program funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Large-print anthologies on popular themes (e.g., The American Family in Literature and History) accompanied by audiotape recordings for the visually impaired, discussion leader guides, and publicity materials were lent free of charge to senior centers across the United States for reading and discussion group programs. At its height in the late 1980s, the program reached about 40,000 people annually.

Similarly, NCOA received many years of funding from the National Endowment for the Arts to run a National Center on Arts and Aging that promoted both arts appreciation and artistic experience through a wide network of organizations (e.g., senior centers, community education programs, colleges, museums). The NEH and NEA were not obliged by the Older Americans Act to fund educational programs for older adults. They, like their counterparts at the state level, were responding to a national consensus that the elderly were both a "deserving" and at that time "underserved" population. Moreover, the case had already been made (highlighted in the 1971 White House Conference on Aging) that older people could learn new tricks and that many were eager to do so (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1974).

After years of pent-up demand, the surge of older learner programs in the 1970s and 1980s was remarkable, the product of a revolutionary change in attitudes about aging and later life, of more effective senior advocacy, and of demographics, by a growing number of retirees with the time, energy, and motivation to pursue continued learning. It was as if the older person were suddenly discovered as a capable and resourceful individual whose vast developmental potential was still intact. The fact that activity theory totally eclipsed disengagement theory is borne out by changes in social policy. Mandatory retirement was gradually eliminated through the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, which took effect in 1979 (amendments occurred in following years). By the time of the United States' Bicentennial, perception of senior citizens (to use the commonest term of the period) was shifting from that of the poor, dependent, marginalized elder to individuals perceived both as deserving and (think of the popular Fiddler on the Roof) as rich repositories of cultural wisdom if not great moral tales of courage and survival—especially through the period of the Great Depression.

It is in this same period that college and university-based Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILRs, later renamed Lifelong Learning Institutes or LLIIs) arose. First, only a handful of the member-led, member-taught, educational programs appeared in the mid-1970s (Weinstein, 1978), but by the mid-1980s there was a sharp rise in the rate of new programs started each year until, by 1990, there were more than 250 of these programs across the United States and another 100 in Canada. ILRs were unique not only because the members were in charge but because these programs were based on a financial model that required participants to help pay for the cost of their own continuing education. Today, this fi-
nancing method may seem unexceptional, but at the time the idea that older learners should pay for their own education was unprecedented. Previously, older learner programs generally depended on the largesse of private and public foundations and government subsidies. That funding basis explains why these programs were so often episodic, coming and going in repetitive cycles of “demonstration” projects that left no infrastructure behind. Perhaps the self-financing business model of most continuing education departments influenced ILRs where, institutionally, they were most often located. This radically new idea of self-financing programs would, it turns out, be a harbinger of the future.

During this same fertile period we find initiation in 1972 of a lifelong learning component in the faith-based, volunteer-run Shepherds Centers; in 1982 of the May Company department stores’ OASIS (Older Adult Service and Information Centers) institutes with their focus on education in the arts and humanities; in 1986 of the older computer user support group, SeniorNet; and of hundreds of other local and statewide programs. Still, not to overstate the trend, according to a U.S. Census Bureau study published in 1985, only 13% of the 65-and-older population had recently enrolled in a course of some type, and a Department of Education survey published in 1986 found that only about 5.7% of people over age 55 participated as full-time or part-time students in high school or college degree programs. Although these percentages reflect a major increase in seniors’ participation in education, the growth is relative to the tiny rate of earlier years.

The United States was certainly not alone in seeing the emergence of older learner programs. The French-initiated “L’Université des Troisième Age,” University of the Third Age (U3A), started at the University of Toulouse in 1975 and by the mid-1980s had spread across Europe and throughout the British Commonwealth countries, including Canada. The university-based, French model involved professors doing the teaching and included a physical fitness component. The version of the U3A imported by the British was different. Their U3As were member run and independent of institutions of higher education. As the programs were replicated in Canada, the Québécois chose the French model and the English-heritage provinces chose that of the United Kingdom. Two very different attitudes toward authority and responsibility remain entrenched in the national cultures on both sides of the Atlantic.

A debate in the United States of the 1970s concerned whether age segregation or age integration was the right direction for older adult education. The normalization, mainstreaming argument pointed toward a future society less based on distinction of age than on needs and interests, one in which there should be more blending of generations in educational settings. But the majority of seniors seemed to prefer learning experiences shared by and with their age peers. And certainly the various organizations that depended on state and federal funding sought to retain their positions as the hosting sites of such programs.

Another inner tension concerned whether emphasis in older learner programs should be placed on humanistic gerontology’s Maslovian “self-actualization” ideal or on the emerging political advocacy emphasis of “empowerment.” A
Table 1:

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<th>Theories of Aging</th>
<th>Older Learner Rationales</th>
<th>Social Policy/Attitudes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Disengagement (1950s)</td>
<td>Rejection—No need</td>
<td>Social Security Act (1935)</td>
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<td>Adaptation—Amelioration</td>
<td>Mandatory retirement legal</td>
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<td>Activity theory (1960+)</td>
<td>Assimilation—Mainstreaming</td>
<td>Older Americans Act (1965); includes multipurpose senior centers</td>
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<td>Self-actualization—Growth</td>
<td>Medicare/Medicaid (1965)</td>
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<td>Empowerment—Advocacy</td>
<td>College tuition waiver policies (1970s)</td>
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<td>NEH/NEA funding arts and humanities programs for seniors</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mandatory Retirement: eliminated (Age Discrimination in Employment Act, 1979)</td>
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NOTE: NEH = National Endowment for the Humanities; NEA = National Education Association.

telling example is the NCOA anthology series that was at first called “Self Discovery Through the Humanities” and later modified in the mid-1980s to just “Discovery Through the Humanities.” What did this small excision signify? The discussion: group participants not only were to see themselves in the “mirror” of literature, history, and philosophy, but they were to peer through a “window into the lives of others.” They were not only to grapple with meaning and wisdom in their later years (the Eriksonian emphasis) but also to find their place “in the fabric of American history” and to gain a voice to assert the dignity and resourcefulness of the now more visible, socially and politically active senior adult.

To visually summarize the relationship of rationales for continued educational opportunities for older adults, theories of aging, and concurrent social policies of the period, consider Table 1.

Although these relationships between charging attitudes, rationales for older learner programs, and parallel changes in legislation were occurring, so were the health and economic conditions of older persons. The 1980s ushered in the concept of the Third Age (Laslett, 1991), a term meant to capture the fact that for the first time in history there was a large group of adults whose existence was defined neither by work nor illness but by opportunity to use discretionary time and money (Hudson, 1997). In postindustrial societies across the world, people were living longer, healthier, and economically more secure lives, usually thanks to public provision of social welfare programs such as private and state-funded pensions plans and national health care insurance (Medicare and Medicaid, in the
United States. Yet this amazing achievement eventually led to a debate over the roles and entitlements of mature adults. This dispute surfaced in a new set of relationships between aging theory, educational rationales, and social policies.

The Connections: 1985 to 2005

The field of aging has undergone a paradigm shift. From the mid-1980s to the closing years of the millennium, the pendulum made a complete swing from the biomedical decrement or “failure model” of aging, with its research focus on ameliorating the “problems” of the elderly, to the more optimistic “successful” or “productive” outlook on aging. A new stereotype of the robust, engaged, thriving senior adult eclipsed the earlier stereotype of the despondent, dependent, disengaged older person. In a complete role reversal, these new creatures, whom I will dub the “neo-elderly,” might even be counted on to help remedy America’s social problems by tutoring at-risk youth (Freedman, 1997) or by reclaiming their youthful protest roots of earlier decades in a new flowering of social activism (Rozsak, 1998).

In point of fact, the neo-elderly were different. They represented a large segment of the older population that lived well above the poverty level, had unprecedented levels of school completion, and could look forward to 10 to 20 years of relatively good health enabling them to extend the activity patterns of the middle years another couple of decades. Indeed, the poverty rate among seniors had fallen from around 35% in 1960 to 10% at the end of the 1990s. Although not all seniors belonged to the neo-elderly category—perhaps one fourth lived within 150% of poverty—nevertheless it seemed that the new discourse about the “age irrelevant society” (Neugarten, 1982) and the “ageless self” (Kaufman, 1986) had become a reality. How then might this remarkable change influence the educational pursuits of the neo-elderly?

To understand the new rationales for older adult education, we have to consider three relatively new theories of aging that emerged toward the end of the 1980s. The first was Swedish sociologist Lars Tornstam’s theory of “gerotranscendence,” the notion that with age comes a radically different life outlook reflecting a cosmological shift in perception. The second, the “deconstructionist” view of aging, is actually a cluster of related theories that result from applying the framework of certain French literary theorists to ideas about aging and later life. And third was the impact of the school of “critical gerontology,” a framework derived from the Frankfurt school of “critical theory” and from the related work of German philosopher Jurgen Habermas. For purposes of this essay, we will take the latter two as one interconnected theory.

Tornstam (1994) argued that when activity eclipsed disengagement theory, something of vital importance was lost. Disengagement theorists highlighted an inward reflective tendency emerging in later life that denoted a change in how older people saw the world and their places within it. The problem, said Torn-
Older Learner's Journey

...tions of the Kansas City study—Tornstam also found a pronounced age-related change. His subjects accepted a more nuanced sense of right and wrong, had greater tolerance for ambiguity and paradox in moral reasoning, and were able to detach themselves from the narrower cultural views of their earlier decades. In short, these individuals experienced "a new feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe," an age-triggered self-transformation that Tornstam called "gerotranscendence" (Tornstam, 1999). The Swedish sociologist argued that this was a naturally occurring transition that would be more strikingly evident if our societies (including their religious institutions) gave older people sufficient encouragement and support to make this spiritual passage to a unique late-life outlook.

It was around the same time that Tornstam's articles started appearing in American journals that the spirituality and aging movement began to grow in the United States. The New York State–based Omega Institute started organizing "Conscious Aging" conferences in 1992 with a host of neo-elderly "stars" such as Baba Ram Dass (who had recently discovered his own aging and written a book about it), Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Gray Panthers founder Maggie Kuhn, and other visionaries who championed the role of the secularly wise, politically active senior, and especially the "spiritual elder." Although Tornstam was not part of this cast of conscious aging advocates, his research-based theory supported the views espoused at these conclaves.

The spirituality and aging movement had a counterpart in the Robert Wood Johnson's (RWJ) "Faith Communities in Action," a major initiative of the foundation to encourage religious congregations to play a larger role in developing support services for older adults. RWJ's initiative was not directed toward cultivating spiritual elders but aimed to strengthen the role of religious organizations in caring for seniors. Still, the foundation was encouraging congregations to enfold the older person within its caring community. Along these same lines, a sizeable research literature discussing the positive health benefits of religious practices and participation in faith communities further underscored these developments (Ellison, 1994).

In the field of aging, concurrent with this movement, the American Society on Aging launched a new constituent unit, the Forum on Religion, Spirituality, and Aging, that grew quickly in membership. From Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi's book, From Age-ing to Sage-ing (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995), a number of Spiritual Eldering Institutes were established to do what Lars Tornstam suggested was missing, namely to nurture older people's capacity for reaching a new level of development so that they might play new roles in society as spiritual mentors to younger generations.
Scholars, advocates, and religious leaders did not cause people to suddenly want to become spiritual elders. This trend reflected a worldwide revival of religious interest, if not zeal, that also swept into the older population and into the field of aging. The trend has also had a profound impact on expanding mainstream older learner programs to include training in yoga, meditation, and tai chi and numerous courses on comparative religion, mysticism, Chinese medicine, ancient and modern mythology, and so on.

Moving now to deconstruction and critical theory, we take them together insofar as they share several premises: (a) that how we talk about aging (forms of discourse) can be shown to contain underlying presuppositions that often go unexamined because they are so much a part of the prevailing cultural ideology; (b) that these hidden "subtexts" tend to favor, or as the commentators like to say, "privilege," certain social classes, research methodologies, academic disciplines (e.g., allopathic or disease-focused medicine), gender (namely, male), gender orientations (namely, heterosexual), and political ideologies; such that (c) only by performing a courageous, quasi-subversive analysis can we reveal the concealed powers that hold the upper hand when certain theories dominate. The upper hand here refers to ones who receive the millions of dollars in public and private research grant awards, have their research findings published in prominent journals, and are called on to testify before government subcommittees involved in setting public policy (and therefore in identifying priorities for further funding).

What deconstruction and critical theory have done is to show that aging is a social construction that has been further reified by the field of gerontology itself. Although it is true that we grow old as a by-product of the mechanisms of cellular change and bodily wear and tear, the socially accepted attributions given to that process are of human invention, the results of cultural, social, and economic forces. The theory goes that once we realize—and can reveal—how the various discourses (medical, political, cultural) shape our attitudes about what it means to grow old, we can liberate ourselves from the imposition of false generalizations, distorting stereotypes, and the suppression of differences.

This form of analysis has generated a number of liberation or emancipation movements of which I can only cite a few examples:

1. Those who encourage a shift away from disease-based, "Western" medicine and the dominant role of the medical establishment, the so-called "medicalization" of old age, toward more humanistic, "mind-body-spirit" approaches, as well as greater appreciation of alternative or complementary medicine (Langino and Murphy, 1995).

2. Advocates who critique a gender-biased view of late life development and counter that women develop differently than do men in the later decades of their lives.

3. Those who reject a "Newtonian view" that uncritically accepts chronological aging as the only form of temporality, thereby rigidifying life stage theories, turning them into a normative developmental sequence of roles for older adults. Instead, these theorists argue, researchers should pay more attention to the more inward,
subjective, and nonlinear experience of time and they champion, instead, a form of "late-life freedom" that encourages the neo-elderly to live whatever kind of life they prefer.

Some scholars consider deconstruction theory as ushering in a "postmodern" view of aging that not only releases older people from constrained forms of social obligation but sets them adrift in a world filled with options but emptied of meaning. They have to cobble together what little cultural and spiritual sustenance is available. Those involved in critical theory and critical gerontology (Cole, Achenbaum, Jakobi, & Kastenbaum, 1993) are likelier to point the neo-elderly toward the freedom to embrace late life spirituality, not to flounder by trying to find their way on their own but to discover viable pathways provided by the various great spiritual traditions that they might reinterpret and appropriate.

Although the work of Tornstam on gerotranscendence, the spirituality and aging movement, and educational programs for seniors focusing on self-development, mind-body awareness, wisdom, comparative religion, and spiritual practices reinforce one another, it may be more difficult to see how deconstruction and critical gerontology theory are directly mirrored in older adult education. Notable are the various women's writing groups that are part of a feminist "croning" movement (Ray, 2004) intended to help older women cast off negative stereotypes and find and give voice to their unique life perspectives. We could also point to the scattering of seminars designed to help people "reinvent" themselves through postretirement career searches and explorations of possible future roles (Marhelmer, 2004). A growing number of travel-learning companies are nudging Elderhostel aside, offering every kind of learning and adventure travel programs conceivable ranging from bicycle tours through Vietnam to voyages around the Antarctic. And Internet educational opportunities emerge in this period so that the independent learner can log on to any number of either fee-based or free seminars, special interest groups, and even degree programs without leaving home. The latter form of education is truly age-irrelevant.

Applied to trends in aging, it may be more the case that deconstruction and critical theory are simply efforts to catch up with what has already happened. For it is no longer remarkable to read about 60- and 70-year-old individuals who have gone back to school to obtain their law degrees, write a first novel, or acquire a pilot's license.

The perspective of Gilteard and Higgs, as expressed in their book, *Cultures of Aging* (2000), helps us to conceptualize the 1985-2005 period. Their work is a critique of theories that presuppose the homogeneity of an "aging society," arguing that instead we have multiple and potentially competing "cultures of aging"—subgroups, "none of which is keen to identify itself with the old age that the policies of the 'postmodern' state address" (p. 8). Age does not confer any "common social identity," they argue. Failure to realize this truth leads policy makers, researchers, and scholars of aging into false generalizations.
Table 2:

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<tr>
<th>Theories of Aging</th>
<th>Older Learner Rationales</th>
<th>Social Policy/Attitudes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gerotranscendence</td>
<td>Preparation for spiritual aging</td>
<td>Conscious Aging Conferences (1992+)</td>
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<td>(1990s)</td>
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<td>RWJ Foundation: Faith Communities in Action Initiative: Research on positive benefits of participation in religious activities</td>
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<td>Deconstruction of Aging (1990s)</td>
<td>Learning as emancipatory</td>
<td>Social Security qualifying age increased</td>
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<td>Aging as social construction</td>
<td>Learning for self-reinventing</td>
<td>Ceiling lifted on Social Security earnings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Postmodern aging</td>
<td>Learning for “croning”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feminist critique of aging</td>
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<td>Cultures of aging (2000)</td>
<td>All rationales valid depending on the particular group</td>
<td>Coming of an age-irrelevant society</td>
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</table>

NOTE: RWS = Robert Wood Johnson.

According to Gillett and Higgs and a host of related British postmodern theorists, there is no universal aging and no monolithic elderly community. Rather, these diverse “cultures of aging” continue to multiply as circumstance of race, gender, income, sexual identity, geography, ethnicity, nationality, health, and religious or spiritual orientation figure into the mixture. As this fragmentation continues, it will precipitate broad reevaluation of age-based social policies, an upheaval in cultural attitudes about what it means to be a neo-elder, and expansion of huge new market niches designed to cater to large numbers of highly diverse people finding their way through (to use what has already become a cliché) the “second half of life.”

Not surprisingly, older learner programs mirror the massive demographic and attitudinal shifts in the conditions of mature adults, their roles in society, and their senses of personal identity. Today, even the most progressive and vital lifelong learning programs for older adults may find themselves on a course toward extinction as the huge new wave of those soon to be retirement-eligible carries with it an antipathy toward age identification while bearing the capacity to forestall the traditional indicators of old age. They may, for instance, retain the lifestyle of their active middle years, pursue health promotion regimens, seek to replace worn joints and tissue, and, increasingly, elect plastic surgeries to lift what sags, smooth what wrinkles, and tuck what folds. If it ever was, it is certainly no longer clear what it means to age gracefully.

Table 2 summarizes the post-1985 paradigms of lifelong learning.
Implications for the Future

Barring unforeseen circumstances, a major portion of the world’s nations will experience unprecedented population aging. For example, by 2020 there will be more people over age 60 in Europe than under 21, nearly one third of Italy’s population will be over 65 by 2030, Japan will be in similar circumstances, and in the United States about 22% will be over age 65. Never before in history will there have been such a demographic shift toward later life. The reasons are well known—lower fertility rates and higher life expectancy. But let us note, never before in history will people in their sixth, seventh, and eighth decades be as robust and high functioning as the neo-elderly. The consequences are challenging: (a) greater pressures on governments to sustain health and income supports for ever-growing numbers of older citizens; (b) increased dependency on immigrant labor from less developed, high fertility rate countries and high fertility rate ethnic groups because of a shrinking labor pool of the indigenous (in the West, generally Caucasian) population; and (c) the need to help the neo-elderly remake traditional roles to maintain their dignity, autonomy, productivity, loyalty to the state, and solidarity with younger generations and to enable them to avoid being perceived as a burden or becoming, as one economist pessimistically put it, part of the “gray dawn” (P. Peterson, 1999).

If, as surveys of baby boomers in the United States indicate, the coming generations will choose to work well past the traditional retirement window (currently around 62 in the United States and younger in Europe and Japan), perhaps if the situation will be partially self-correcting. It may become commonplace for individuals to work full- or part-time well into their 70s and 80s (assuming, as few do, that jobs will be readily available). And if the trend of people rejecting terms like elder, older adult, senior, and retirement- aged continues, then chronological age will in fact become less significant and we will see the rise of an “age-irrelevant” society. Until now, age-irrelevance has referred to the shift from using chronological age to qualify a person for certain legislated entitlements to qualifying people on the basis of needs (Neugarten, 1982). The term will take on a much broader significance in societies in which one fourth to one third of the population consists of the neo-elderly, individuals who vehemently reject age categories as an imposed, artificial, and prejudicial label while they lead lives not unlike today’s 40- and 50-year-olds and think of themselves as fundamentally the same person over time and, hence, an “ageless self.”

Nevertheless, unless researchers discover a way of readjusting the biological clock, people will eventually grow frail, experience dwindling energy levels, and tire of appearing at work each day—even if showing up means stepping into one’s home workstation. Perhaps we will see a lengthened, robust midlife and an abbreviated “fourth age” of decline. This “compression of morbidity” ideal (Fries, 1980) has yet to become a reality for the majority of people, although disability rates have been falling as a correlate of aging. Although some may argue that age- irrelevance reflects denial of the aging process and a continued obsession with
youthfulness, what some commentators such as Woodward (1991) and Biggs (1997) call the "masquerade" of aging (because the mask or disguise also reminds us of what is being hidden), it is nevertheless a very real and powerful impulse, increasingly fed by an expanding industry replete with a growing arsenal of anti-aging technologies.

For our purposes, we want to assess how the trend toward an age-irrelevant society will affect the thousands of lifelong learning programs for older adults when the full force hits. Who will show up at the doors of educational institutions on which the word senior, retirement, golden, or elder appears in the title? This is not merely a matter of nomenclature.

When AARP chose a few years ago to adopt its acronym as the official organizational name and to distance itself from the word retirement, it joined a trend occurring throughout the culture. Senior centers were becoming enrichment centers. Elderhostel, in 2004, launched a set of new, more customized and expensive programs targeted to baby boomers under the clever title, "Road Scholar," a name that could eventually become the corporate brand. Another group, Civic Ventures, came up with "Life Option Centers" (recently modified to "Next Chapters") and, as mentioned, a consortium of Institutes for Learning in Retirement recommended that LLIs now refer to themselves as LLIs (Lifelong Learning Institutes), thereby dropping the problematic R word. And then there is the school volunteer program operated under the Corporation for National and Community Service's Senior Corps called Experience Corps. These name changes neutralize age attributions. The new names have few if any connotations to a time of life, for certainly even 10-year-olds have "experience," and everyone has or wants "options" and "next chapters."

Still, in their contexts, we know what the names mean once we read the qualifying ages or see the pictures of participants in the brochures and newsletters (Road Scholar excepted, because the people in many of the pictures in its handsome catalog look to be in their 20s and 30s). The names are an attempt to remove associations with respect to age, stage, or work status. But it is unclear whether renaming will successfully offset resistance to the stigma of age identification. It is likely that the very content and teaching modalities of these programs will also have to change to keep up with the times if they are to lure the neo-elderly who may shun existing programs, choosing instead to sign up, in the days and evenings when they are not working, for age-neutral continuing education courses at community colleges and universities.

Not surprisingly, there is increased discussion within the network of lifelong learning programs of what the future holds. Recently, the Elderhostel Institute Network (EIN), a consortium of more than 300 LLIs in the United States and Canada supported as a public service by Elderhostel, produced guidelines for factors to consider when trying to recruit baby boomer generation members (Nordstrom, 2004). There are hundreds of similar documents (not to mention conferences on marketing to "the over-50") that attempt to characterize baby boomer attitudes and life outlooks. Boomers, these guides generalize, are more anti-
thoritarian than current generation members and may not be attracted to the expert-led, lecture-discussion format or lengthy semesters (maybe 4 weeks, but not longer). Boomers have shorter attention spans and prefer multimedia presentations; they are less likely to be interested in classical music and more in folk, rock, and world music; they like active, hands-on activities rather than passive sitting and listening. As volunteers, boomers want short-term, meaningful, goal-accomplishing assignments, not ongoing roles as in committee memberships. If, in fact, these generalizations hold true for even a subset of the boomer generation, should LLIs and related lifelong learning programs be concerned?

With the exception of a national study of older adult education conducted in 1994-1995 (Manheimer & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995), there is little in the way of accurate national data about noncredit, lifelong learning programs for older adults. Self-reported enrollment trends collected for a 2004 LLI regional conference indicated that 50% of the organizations had experienced a leveling off or decline in participation rates (Nordstrom, 2004). Like Elderhostel, they have more competition now from other types of leisure, travel, and educational programs that have cropped up, and they are experiencing the kind of aging-in-place that has plagued senior centers, retirement communities, and other age self-identified organizations. Because of similar factors (plus the huge, temporary collapse of foreign travel following the September 11 cataclysm), Elderhostel's participation rates have tumbled from a high of 315,000 in 1996 (Selman, Cooke, Selman, & Dampier, 1998) to 191,000 in 2002. And participants' average age has increased from 68 in 1998 to 72.5 in 2002 (Ruffenach, 2004). Elderhostel may be a barometer of what is happening or will soon happen to lifelong learning programs in the United States and perhaps elsewhere.

Can we put new wine in old bottles? Yes, but the results, according to enologists, are far from satisfactory. The view, "let the next generation make its own programs," has been overheard at some of the regional EIN conferences. As Durkheim said, when society's values change, so must those of education. And, indeed some LLIs may simply decide to close up shop as their numbers dwindle rather than remake themselves. It is possible that the need to create separate older learner programs has passed as other existing organizations now target this age group as part of their service mission and consumer base. But if existing lifelong learning programs for older adults are to continue to thrive by successfully negotiating the transition to an age-irrelevant society containing numerous and overlapping cultures of aging, what might they look like? There are several possible scenarios that reflect, in turn, how our societies will adapt to the "coming of age."

If, as I have argued, shifts in public policy and cultural attitudes toward, and theories of, aging hold true as correlates (but not necessarily causes) of the emergence of various types of lifelong learning programs and their rationales, we should be able to predict the near-term future of these endeavors. Focusing our discussion on the United States, let us consider current trends whose development can be traced from the mid-1990s.
In the mid-1990s, preoccupation with balancing the federal budget led to cutbacks in social services and entitlement programs, including those directed toward the elderly. The so-called "senior lobby" had grown to fight just to retain ground gained in the period 1960 to 1990 rather than seek expansion of entitlements (Binstock, 1997). Discussion of intergenerational inequities (the "deserving" elderly were now characterized as "greedy geezers") emerged in the mid-1990s, and although this controversy has abated, nevertheless there is greater awareness that the burgeoning elderly population will place great stress on federal, state, and local budgets, perhaps to the detriment of other age groups. The intergenerational equity concern is leading to proposals to further raise the qualifying age for Social Security benefits from 67 (by 2030) to perhaps age 70 and to do similarly with Medicare (thereby forcing retirees to seek private health insurance until they reach this qualifying age or to remain with an employer that provides health insurance).

Liberalizing of pension policies to allow retired employees to return to working for their longtime employer on a part-time or project basis suggests another change toward encouraging continued employment and deferring dependency on income guarantees. Pension plans have also shifted from "defined benefit," in which the employer guarantees an annuity level, to "defined contribution," in which the employee decides how much to put aside in contributing to the plan. These changes, along with legislation aimed at full or partial privatization of the Social Security program, point to the shift toward placing greater responsibility for economic and health security on the individual rather than the state, employer, or society. Indeed, the rhetoric of "successful aging" is coming back to haunt those who championed the term.

As far as theories of aging are concerned, the immediate future is simultaneously framed by an extension of the normative element of activity theory that has turned into productive aging; various liberationist theories calling for the emancipation from stereotypes of older women (feminist critique of aging), older minorities, older prisoners, and older gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transsexual persons; and varieties of postmodern theories aimed to dispel categories of aging and elderly as illusory social inventions (Galluette, 1997) or hypostatized constructs of the field of gerontology itself (Katz, 1996). And last, although we could never say finally, is the all-embracing "cultures of aging" framework suggesting that each theory describes some subset of the neo-elderly but not others. Returning to our chart but leaving space to correlate rationales for older learner programs, we have Table 3.

In the near-term future (the next 15 years), as a correlate to these trends, we can speculate that lifelong learning opportunities will increasingly become a function of the marketplace. Those who are in sufficiently good health, are motivated by having enjoyed prior years of education (the main predictor of participation), and can afford to enroll in LLIs, pay for travel-learning excursions, sign up for continuing education courses, register for back-to-campus alumni semi-
Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theories of Aging</th>
<th>Older Learner Rationales</th>
<th>Social Policy/Attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity theory/productive</td>
<td>Shift from age-qualified</td>
<td>Emphasis on self-reliance rather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aging</td>
<td>to need-based entitlements</td>
<td>than state dependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodern/emancipatory</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Privatization of Social Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deconstruction/spiritual</td>
<td>Age escalation in qualifying for entitlements</td>
<td>proposed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age-irrelevant/agelessness</td>
<td>Shift from defined benefits (DB) to defined contribution (DC) pension policies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

nars, access Internet educational sites, and choose from among a cornucopia of other lifelong learning programs, will reap the benefits of “successful aging.” Educational programming for baby boomers especially will be a thriving business that deans of continuing education programs and directors of for-profit travel-learning companies, among others, are (or should be) discovering. We should expect an increase in demand for vocational education for second and third careers with likely emphasis on technical, managerial, and business-related training needs. Also, retirement communities associated with colleges and universities should experience a surge in growth (Manheimer, 2003).

Those who do not fare so well because of poor health, limited incomes, or lack of motivation because of more restrictive prior education (especially minority neo-elders) will find comparatively little from which to choose in the way of intellectually challenging programs. In fact, those who do not fit the image of successful aging will be chastised as somehow “failed agers,” a moral castigation of those who seem not to have seized the opportunity to age well. It doesn’t require much reflection to see that this scenario is an extension of current trends.

Although all the social and role theories of aging will remain relevant for certain subgroups of the neo-elderly, it is probably the cultures of aging framework that will be the most predictive of the trend toward the neo-elder as self-centered consumer in a society increasingly fragmented, one in which few vestiges of solidarity among older citizens will remain and these will be in isolated affinity groups such as same-church elders or people living in gated, age-qualified retirement communities. The gulf between the haves and have-nots, the successful and the disenfranchised neo-elderly, will only widen. Calls for public funding for educational programs for the underserved will mainly fall on deaf ears. The disenfranchised will have become the neo-disengaged elders.

Educational programs that hold on to the current nomenclature—self-identified as for elders, for retirees, for seniors—either will dwindle or will find
themselves mainly attracting a trailer, older population, a trend already occurring at some of the most popular Elderhostel sites such as the famous music conservatory, the Peabody Institute (C. Lidard, personal communication, 2004) and very much like the trend in continuing care retirement communities with entry ages usually in the late 70s. Meanwhile, other forms of lifelong learning will continue to grow in popularity. Already, in 1999, the percentage of those aged 66 to 74 who took at least one adult education class in the previous year more than doubled—from 8.4% in 1991 to 19.9% (National Household Education Survey, 1999). The biggest area of growth was in community-based, non-credit-generating, educational programs. This trend will only continue as people with higher rates of college completion reach midlife and the various decision points of the neo-elderly. This is not to say that the ideological dominance of the laissez-faire economy of our consumer-oriented societies is the most desirable direction, for certainly any ideal of equal access following principles of distributive justice seems overshadowed by other criteria and social values.

Lifelong learning programs in the United States and Canada will continue to mirror their countries’ economic systems. These programs—whether conducted through colleges, senior centers, hospitals, libraries, or religious congregations or sponsored by private sector organizations such as banks, department stores, and travel-learning agencies—will remain market driven and increasingly require full fees or some form of “copayment” for enrollment. Trends in other countries may be somewhat different.

Currently, there are more than 20,000 “universities for old people” in China whose purpose or rationale, their mission statements proclaim, is to enable an older citizen to carry out his or her “sacred duty” to society by avoiding boredom and depression, gaining knowledge of hygiene and herbal medicine, and learning ways to provide care to others (Herzong, 1997). An older learner in China is responsible for trying to remain as independent as possible while helping to relieve the health care burden shouldered by the state. Yet, as China moves toward a more free-market economy, this educational policy, mainly directed toward a generation of people who sacrificed much of their life opportunities during China’s tumultuous years of war and revolution, will probably change direction.

In terms of the content of curricula, many older learner programs, especially in the United States and Canada, will continue to exhibit a fair degree of independence because these programs are not tied to credentialing guidelines and are far less likely to be censured for teaching controversial subjects than are public secondary and postsecondary schools. A look at any of the curriculum catalogs of LLIs in the United States would reveal a wide spectrum of courses ranging from “The Human Genome Project: Hope or Hype?” (Encore, 2005) to “Define Your God” (DILR, 2005). LLI members teach these courses after selection by a curriculum committee of peers.

Again, to draw cross-national comparisons, the almost counterculture tableau of LLI course offerings would not be found in Spain, where some 50 older learner programs are administered by universities, are taught by their professors, and re-
quire older students to enroll in a 3-year curriculum with limited options for elective courses. The academic authority-based, in loco parentis approach is a by-product of Spanish history and culture. Most of the older students did not formerly have the chance to attend college during the years of the Franco regime, and Spanish universities have not, until recently, played the role of American ones with their continuing education departments serving a wide variety of purposes ranging from postdegree professional education to personal enrichment. The Spanish universities are not about to invest their older students with the power to shape their own curricula, nor is this generation of older Spanish students of a mind to regard themselves as capable of playing such a role. Whether Spain will gradually move in the direction of the United States, liberalizing and commodifying continuing education for the neo-elderly, remains to be seen.

Durkheim Revisited: Rationale Versus Motivation

Were he alive today, what would sociologist-philosopher Durkheim say? His (what today may seem) overly nationalistic ideas about education as a function of the social order were drawn as a sharp contrast to the then-competing view that a universal ideal of the individual child's psychological development should be the main focus of the schools. Durkheim strongly disagreed. Although he admired Rousseau and other child-centered advocates, he believed that the function of education was chiefly to serve and sustain the national society. As he once commented, the purpose of education in Rome was to produce Romans, and in Athens, Athenians—in each case, an ideal type of citizen. Psychology might determine the means of education but sociology would determine its ends. And although Durkheim's claim can be easily verified in studying the modern history of pedagogy, it perhaps comes as a surprise to see reflected in older adult education where so much of what has happened over the last 50 years, at least in the United States, has been initiated at the grassroots level with little national coordination.

Durkheim's distinction between education based on individual psychological development and what society needs from its citizens also reminds us that an organization's rationale for supporting older learner programs may not be the same as an older learner's motive for participation. Social connectedness, self-actualization, empowerment, and emancipation may be admirable concepts for the goals that educational programs intend to foster, but they do not represent the vocabulary or perceptions of the average older learner. Because participation in most older learner programs is voluntary, there has to be an appealing image that corresponds to the learner's perception of needs and desires. Numerous studies of older learner motivation to participate confirm that intellectual stimulation, sociability, and some type of skills enhancement are at the top of the list (for a summary of motivation research, see Manheimer et al., 1995). The individual's perspective may or may not coincide with the organization's rationale. The older learner may never even know or care about this rationale.
The key to the future education for the neo-elderly is hidden in the murky thicket of a dream, the older learner's sometimes vague and perhaps conflicted sense of the ideal life that could be associated with a reprieve from the stresses and restrictive demands of full-time employment. I speculate that this has something to do with freedom—the freedom of choosing one's own schedule, activities, and opportunities: the freedom made possible by good health, adequate funds, and the security of knowing that one is protected in the case of a financial or health care emergency. This freedom, I would also claim, enables the individual to expand beyond his or her present horizon of the possible. When lifelong learning announces its connection to the dream of freedom, it generates a powerful magnetism between organizational rationale and learner motive. The challenge lifelong learning organizations face is dream analysis—identifying the incipient yearnings of coming generations that will help to create this magnetism and develop the language to embody and communicate its energy. Yet, following Durkheim, are individual yearnings, even if taken collectively, sufficient basis for education? How much individual freedom can a society tolerate or support?

In the United States, a strong push is underway to convince the emerging neo-elderly to consider the needs of others. The message that civic engagement advocates bring to the so-called "Me Generation" is that freedom should not be uncoupled from responsibility. Great concern is expressed, for example, in a 2004 report from the Harvard Center for Health Communications that baby boomers will not volunteer to the degree of their parents' generation and that even if they did, the infrastructure does not exist that would enable society to use them appropriately (Center for Health Communications, Harvard School of Public Health, 2004). Although educational programs for older learners are not obligated to incorporate community service as an element of their mission and rationale, the combination may hold particular appeal for the socially conscious neo-elder. Perhaps this option should be part of a learning, leadership, wellness, and service quaternary for future programs.

Although there may be some truth in the notion that the more we know of the past, the more we can foresee the future, nevertheless something like the success of Elderhostel, the LLI movement, or the Universities of the Third Age should still strike us as at least moderately inexplicable. Although the soil in which innovation is to work its magic needs to be fertile, someone has to come along and plant the seeds. Once the new plants are up in abundance, we can easily stroll by and nod, "ah, yes; quite inevitable." But when activist Marty Knowlton and administrator David Bianco sowed the seeds for Elderhostel in 1975, those who imagined the program's explosive growth were few and far between. Likewise, when NCOA launched its Senior Center Humanities Program the next year, this unprecedented innovation was met with considerable doubt. Historical contextualizing tends to make change look inevitable. I argue that the future is open to those who will chance to cast the seeds of innovation. They will reconfigure the constellation of theories, policies, and rationales for the future of lifelong learning.
References


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