

## Transcendence in Later Life

By Lars Tornstam

When the disengagement theory first was introduced in the early 1960s (Cumming and Newell, 1960; Cumming and Henry, 1961), theoretical discussions of it turned into something like a riot. The theory assumed

an intrinsic tendency to disengage and withdraw when growing old, which was supposed to go hand in hand with the tendency of society to reject aging individuals.

The theory of disengagement ran counter not only to the widely accepted theory of activity, which held that individuals who remained engaged aged more “successfully,” but also to the personal values held by many gerontologists and their wishes regarding what reality ought to be like. It is not surprising, then, that the theory of disengagement was perceived as threatening and uninviting and that much time and effort were expended during the next two decades to disprove the theory, which has since been regarded almost with disdain.

But might it be that some of the baby was thrown out with the bathwater? Indeed, some who study aging began to ask whether certain

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*A shift in how we  
reevaluate our world and  
our place in it.*

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aspects of the disengagement theory might have an overlooked strength, in many cases based on their own subjective experience. For example, the now-deceased Polish gerontologist Jerzy Piotrowski, who had himself partici-

parted in the process of disproving the disengagement theory later stated that it perhaps had some theoretical strength after all, based on evidence that, he said, “comes from within myself.”

Subjective reports from staff working with old people have also pointed to some hidden theoretical strength in the disengagement theory. Care providers have reported that their feelings are very mixed when trying to “activate” certain old people. The workers say that while they believe that activity is good, they nevertheless have the feeling that they are doing something wrong when they try to drag some older people to various forms of social activity or activity therapy. The caregivers say they feel that they are trespassing on something they ought to respect and leave alone.

Other, more “solid” indicators have also pointed to the notion that the disengagement

theory might in some ways be valid. For example, in my study of experiences of loneliness among inhabitants of Sweden 15 to 80 years of age (Tornstam, 1988, 1990), it was shown, contrary to our expectations, that the degree of loneliness decreased with age—despite role and other losses. It was the young respondents, not the old ones, who reported the highest degrees of loneliness.

Maybe these experiences and observations could be understood if what we earlier had defined as a negative “disengagement” was reconstructed within a new framework—a framework that allows developmental changes in the way we define reality and ourselves as we age. In an early lecture, Jung (1930) stated that the meaning and the tasks of old age are quite different from those tasks of midlife. In the first part of life, the task is getting acquainted with and socialized to society, whereas the task in old age is getting acquainted with yourself and with what Jung called the collective unconscious. Much of this process can be understood as a transcendental change of the definitions of reality.

With these considerations in mind, I began to formulate the theory of “gerotranscendence” (Tornstam, 1989). Gerotranscendence is the final stage in a natural process moving toward maturation and wisdom. Gerotranscendence implies the construction of a reality somewhat different from the view commonly held in midlife, which gerontologists and practitioners tend to project on old age. According to the theory, the gerotranscendent individual experiences a new feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, a redefinition of time, space, life, and death, and a redefinition of the self.

The theory suggests that through aging, or rather living, the degree of transcendence increases. I believe that this process is intrinsic but modified by specific cultural patterns. I also believe that this process is generated by normal living. The very process of living an everyday life and an intrinsic drive toward transcendence are only different sides of the same coin.

The movement toward gerotranscendence is a continuous one, but the process can be obstructed or accelerated. It might, for example, be accelerated by a life crisis, after which the individual totally restructures his or her view

of the world instead of returning to the view held before.

The movement toward gerotranscendence can also be impeded. It is most probable that elements in our culture, for example, hinder this process. We will find many different degrees of gerotranscendence in old people. It is a process, which, at its very best, ends with a new cosmic perspective.

The idea of a life process that optimally ends with gerotranscendence recalls the developmental model formulated by Erik Erikson (1950, 1982). In this model, the individual develops through seven stages and, if all goes well, ends up in an eighth stage, which Erikson calls ego integrity. In this stage, the individual reaches a fundamental acceptance of his or her own life, regardless of how good or bad it has been, and looks back and feels satisfied with the past.

According to Erikson’s theory, if the individual does not reach the stage of ego integrity, he or she experiences despair and fear of death. An important difference between Erikson’s eighth stage and gerotranscendence is that in Erikson’s theory the individual is looking back at the life lived, from within the same paradigm, while gerotranscendence implies more of looking forward and outward, with a new view of the self and the world.

#### DIMENSIONS OF GEROTRASCENDENCE

The first attempt to empirically illuminate the theory was based on qualitative interviews with 50 Swedish people between 52 and 97 years of age. After having listened to a lecture on gerotranscendence, these 50 people, out of a group of 500, said they recognized in their personal development the phenomena described by the theory and were willing to be interviewed. This interview process, described elsewhere (Tornstam, 1997a), together with quantitative analyses of responses of 912 representative Danish men and women between 74 and 100 years of age (Tornstam, 1994) and 2,002 representative Swedes between 20 and 85 years of age (Tornstam, 1997b), led to the identification of the dimensions of gerotranscendence described below.

*The cosmic level.* The following dimensions are related to broad philosophical concerns:

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- Changes in the definitions of time and space, for example, the transcendence of borders between past and present.

- Increasing sense of connection to earlier generations.

- New comprehension of life and death, including disappearance of the fear of death.

- Acceptance of the mystery dimension in life.

- Rejoicing in a range of events and experiences.

*The self.* These dimensions are related to aspects of the self:

- Self-confrontation. Discovery and confrontation of hidden aspects of the self, both good and bad.

- Decrease of self-centeredness.

- Development of “body transcendence.” Taking care of body, but not being obsessed with it.

- Self-transcendence. Moving from egoism to altruism.

- Rediscovery of the child within.

- Ego integrity. Realizing that the pieces of life’s jigsaw puzzle form a wholeness.

*Social and individual relationships:* The last group of dimensions are related to social and individual relationships.

- Changed meaning and importance of relationships. Becoming more selective and less interested in superficial relationships, with increasing need for solitude.

- New understanding of the difference between self and role. Sometimes an urge to abandon roles, sometimes a new, comforting understanding of the necessity of roles in life.

- Emancipated innocence. The addition of innocence to maturity.

- Modern asceticism. The understanding of the petrifying gravity of wealth and the freedom of asceticism.

- Transcendence of the right-wrong duality. Understanding the difficulty in separating right from wrong, withholding from judgments and from giving advice.

Some of these dimensions, or “indicators,” of gerotranscendence might easily be misinterpreted as signs of depression, dementia, isolation, or negative disengagement and could make many old people feel guilty or even apologetic about their gerotranscendental change. How-

ever, the above-mentioned empirical studies have shown the following characteristics of people with a high degree of gerotranscendence. Individuals with a high degree of gerotranscendence have a higher degree of self-controlled social activity than individuals with a low degree of gerotranscendence, a higher degree of life satisfaction, and show more satisfaction with their social activities. Also, individuals with a high degree of gerotranscendence are less dependent on social activities for their well-being and have more active and complex coping patterns. In addition, the research revealed that life crises accelerate the development toward gerotranscendence and that the signs of gerotranscendence cannot be explained away as symptoms of disease, depression, or consumption of psychiatric drugs.

### THE EXAMPLE OF EVA

Eva, formerly a nurse, was 69 years old at the time of the interview. Though not from a poor family, she had a difficult childhood; her upbringing was strict and brutal. She is divorced and has three adult children. She experienced a deep crisis in connection with her divorce a number of years ago. She said, “I don’t think a person should ask for crises, but I think that we learn something from the crises we go through.”

In answering the open question about whether she has changed her attitude toward life and herself, she described a rather radical change in perspective: “Using an analogy, earlier I used to feel that I was out on a river being carried away by the stream without being able to control it. Even if I wanted to go ashore I couldn’t control it; I was carried away both from pleasant and unpleasant things. But today I feel like the river. I feel like I’m the river. I feel that I’m part of the flow that contains both the pleasant and the unpleasant things.”

In contrast to the earlier experience of being a powerless object being thrown back and forth in “the river of life,” Eva now perceives herself as a part of the flow of life itself. The boundary between herself as an object and the universal life has been transcended. Eva came back to this type of change several times during the interview. Now, she said, she feels that she “participates in a wider circle, in humanity.”

With this complete change in her attitude toward life, Eva has also noticed that the sources of joy in life have changed: "Well, earlier it may have been things like a visit to the theater, a dinner, a trip. I wanted certain things to happen that I was a little excited about. My best times [now are] when I sit on the kitchen porch and simply exist, the swallows flying above my head like arrows. Or a spring day like this when I can go to my nettle patch and pick nettles for soup."

Opening up her enclosed self to the outer world, Eva has achieved an ability to watch herself from the outside. Describing her change, she said about her old self that "I couldn't see myself from the outside." Now watching her old self from the outside she can see a good deal of self-infatuation.

Eva has transcended conventions about the body. She does not deny that her body is changing. It does not scare her. She has no need to separate body and mind in the way that many aging people do, that is, to look at the aging body with disgust, claiming the unchangeability of the mind or the self. Separating body and mind has almost become the norm for the aging human being as well as for the gerontologist. In her book *The Ageless Self*, Kaufman (1986) has introduced this separation between body and mind as part of the normal aging process. The self does not age, only the body. In this perspective, then, Eva's aging is not normal. In her, changes occur in both body and mind. There is a self developing in an aging body. Eva not only accepts but enjoys this development.

Having the courage to be herself, Eva today dares to say and do things that she did not dare to earlier—out of fear of breaking the rules and embarrassing herself. "I'm old enough and wise enough to dare to do dumb things," Eva said.

However, when asked if it has become easier with age to make wise decisions and give good advice to other people, Eva answered:

"Well, it's easier to make both dumb and wise decisions, but there is one thing that I find easier today. That is to refrain from giving good advice."

For Eva, the previously clear difference between good and bad advice has been transcended. Eva thinks that deciding what is good

and what is bad is not as easy as it used to be, particularly where other people are concerned.

In these excerpts and throughout the interview, Eva demonstrated that she has come a long way toward gerotranscendence. Eva is happy and satisfied with her life today. She radiates satisfaction with life.

#### THE PROFESSIONAL'S LESSON

A lesson to be learned from the theory of gerotranscendence is that the definition of reality develops and changes due to experiences in life and maturation. What from the perspective of a younger relative or a care aide might look like negative disengagement can from within the definition held by the person in consideration be part of a positive development toward maturation and wisdom. When a professional working with a specific old person is confronted with the indicators of gerotranscendence, the question should always be whether these behaviors belong within the positive perspective of gerotranscendence or not. After interviewing the person in question, the professional will probably find that gerotranscendence is at hand in many cases first interpreted in a more negative way.

Professionals working with old people should also remember that some individuals might find great comfort in having the possible way to gerotranscendence explained and described as a perfectly normal way to develop in old age. A great deal of guilt and feelings of abnormality can be taken away by such a description. ☪

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