

## Chapter Five

# The Marriage of Self and Society

When I was a graduate student, the dominant sociological theory about aging rested on something called “disengagement theory,” the basic assumption of which was that healthy aging required people to disengage from meaningful life activities. It’s natural, these theorists argued, that the old would choose to disengage from active participation in society—natural for the person and beneficial to the society.

Natural? Well, maybe. It’s certainly true that the older we get, the more likely we are to be ready to free ourselves from the constraints of the roles we’ve inhabited for so long, to withdraw, to husband our strength and our energy. We know what mountains we’ve conquered, what we couldn’t do, and the lucky among us are satisfied with what we see. It’s time to step back, to reflect on our lives, on who we were, who we’ve become and how we got there; time also to find a way toward a future that’s not immediately apparent, and, paradoxically, to plan for life while preparing also to leave it.

So, yes, disengagement theorists got some things right, but they also got a lot wrong. For one thing, they assumed that be-

cause the old are no longer considered useful in society, it's natural for them to choose to opt out, forgetting or ignoring how much of engagement and disengagement is an interactive process. When society has no use for some segment of its people, when their presence is an inconvenience, an embarrassment, or simply undesired, people of any age will disengage.

Stereotypes that dog our steps—whether based on race, age, or gender—are powerful disincentives to engagement, to say nothing of how destructive they are to the soul. We see it in the significant numbers of young black men who have disengaged, sometimes because they're so angry, but often because it's the only way they can figure out to preserve some positive sense of self. And we see it among the old who more and more close themselves off in the euphemistically labeled "active adult communities," homogeneous residential facilities where, because they're surrounded by others like themselves, they're insulated from the stigma that accompanies them in the world outside.<sup>1</sup>

Listen to the voices of those who live in such communities and you'll hear them speak about the comfort of being with age peers, the sense of belonging and acceptance, the easy companionship, the planned activities designed to meet their needs and interests. "We're all in the same boat. It's a nice feeling; it's a very congenial group," is the way one woman puts it.

Disengagement theory has always had its critics, and their voices have grown louder as our longer life has brought the issues of the old into greater public awareness. But as is true in many parts of American life, whether social or scientific, the new heedlessly sweeps out the old. So the theory of disengagement has been discarded in favor of a new one that foresees a life of endless engagement—a view of aging that's as one-sided as the old one was.

For like everything else about old age, it's not all or nothing, not disengagement or engagement, but both forces working in-

side us all the time: the pull of disengagement that feels like preparation for what is inevitably our future, a subtle pulling away, an inwardness that wants solitude and keeps us from entering the social world as fully as we did before; the push toward engagement that seeks to give meaning to the present while delaying the future, the wish to be seen, to be heard, to be counted, to be needed.

How, then, does one find meaning in a society where dignity and respect are so closely associated with work and productivity? We need to engage a spiritual quest, some people say, the search for something inside that is perhaps truer, deeper, more transcendent than the life we've lived until now. I'm never quite sure what that means. Friends who are practicing Buddhists speak of finding the way to balance the physical with the spiritual, of living and experiencing the present moment fully, with no comparison, no judgment, no thought of anything else, of leaving behind the strivings we all know to discover something more fundamental inside us, something closer to our essential self.

Certainly, it's possible to free ourselves from some of the most destructive effects of our competitive, production-oriented society. Sure, we can live in the moment—for a moment. But how can this be a way of life when, because we have the gift of memory and consciousness, we bring every moment we've lived into every moment we're living? And what about this essential self people speak of? Is there really such a thing, a self that exists outside of past experience and free of society's norms and values?

Perhaps my doubts flow from my sociological training, perhaps from my thirty-five years of experience as a psychotherapist, perhaps it's simple truth. We, all of us, live in a dynamic interactive process with the world around us. The social world changes, and so do we. Just forty years ago marriage between blacks and whites was illegal in many states; today most of us consider such restrictions unthinkable. Until then, too, states had the right to

outlaw contraceptive use, even in marriage, an idea so at odds with our beliefs now that we wonder how it could ever have been acceptable.

We take on a new role—worker, wife, husband, mother, father—and grow into it, changing and broadening what until then was the self we knew. It doesn't always happen easily and without conflict, but if we live the role long enough, it becomes part of who we are, even after we have left it. A husband dies and the part of his widow that was his wife remains alive inside her. How could it be otherwise when the experience of that marriage is an integral part of the self she knows?

This isn't to say we're little more than lumps of clay to be molded into the shape society prefers. Rather, my argument is that from birth onward we are active and seeking participants in our development—seeking, in that we continually respond to our internal need for connection with another; active, in that we are in a constant process of internalizing representations of people and objects from the world around us. A sense of self and personal identity is formed and sharpened in the context of such social interaction, products of the interplay between the external and the internal, between social experience and its psychological elaboration. It's the power of these socializing forces that welds us into a society of people who play by the rules, even when those on the outside—those who live by different rules—find ours unjust, incomprehensible, even repellent.

It follows, then, that self and society are inextricably interwoven, that the one does not exist without the other, that the customs, values, beliefs, and roles of any society are internalized so deeply by its citizens that they come to believe they are their own.

Witness, for example, the mothers and grandmothers in some African tribes who impose on their daughters the ritual female circumcision that not only brought them pain but left them crip-

pled in both body and spirit. Some say the mothers do this to their daughters because they won't be marriageable otherwise, a virtual death sentence for a woman in these societies. No doubt that's true. But another truth is that the older women have so internalized those customs that they believe them to be right and just, the only way to live and be a woman. Which in turn makes it possible for the daughters to accept their mutilation, even desire it as the mark of their entry into the community of women and, what's more, to believe they're making a free choice.

So it is with old age in our society. The beliefs and attitudes about age that surround us inevitably color how we think of ourselves. When I was sixty and got stuck in my writing, no one ever said to me, as an acquaintance to whom I was complaining recently did, "Let's face it, you're past eighty and your brain's not so nimble anymore." He didn't think he was being cruel; he was just saying what he knows to be true. And indeed, it wasn't the first time I'd heard those words. I've been saying them to myself ever since I took on this project.

Is it any wonder that I take what sometimes seems to me to be inordinate pride in looking much younger than I am? Since I turned eighty two years ago, I tell whoever will listen how old I am because I want to hear them respond with wonder, with some version of, "No, you're kidding; I'd never have guessed." An observation that invariably pleases and shames me—pleases me because I love to hear those words, shames me for the same reason, because it has become so important to me not to look like *them*, even while I know I'm one of them.

So why do I continue to do it? No doubt the main reason is the obvious one: the pleasure outweighs the pain. But it's also a way of getting in their face, of saying, "Never mind what you've always believed; look at me, this is also eighty-two."

My puny efforts notwithstanding, there's no getting around the fact that if society is revolted by the aged, old people are re-

volted by themselves. I look at my naked body, at the flesh that hangs from my upper arms, the breasts that droop, the belly that bulges, and I experience a small shock, a shiver of disgust. I turn away, wanting to cover myself as quickly as possible, to clothe myself with garments bought in the hope they'll hide what I don't want the world to see. Once dressed, I look in the mirror and see a small, slim woman whose image leaves me relieved: *I can still fake it, cover it up. What's the it? Being old, of course.*

I worry about my arms and belly; Nora Ephron worries about her neck. "If anyone young is reading this, go right this minute, put on a bikini and don't take it off until you're thirty-four," she commands. After that it's downhill all the way. By the time you're forty-three, she announces, you'd better hide your neck. The creams, lotions, oils may help the face fake it, but the neck tells the tale. "Our faces are lies and our necks are the truth," she insists.<sup>2</sup> And true to her word, the photograph on the book jacket shows her well covered with a turtleneck up over her chin.

Medical advances, changing lifestyles, a new sense of what's possible if we take care of our bodies have made an enormous difference in pushing back the aging process. But we know when we're getting old, even when we don't want to know it. For however successfully we manage to cover up the visible signs of our aging, we don't fool our bodies. An hour a day on the StairMaster may increase our aerobic capacity, but the body continues to change in predictable ways. Memory slips, we get tired when we didn't before, various body parts don't work as well as they used to, aches and pains appear in places we didn't know we had. The doctor, when we see him, listens to our complaints, shakes his head, and says kindly, "Yes, things begin to wear out; it's all a natural part of the aging process."

So natural, in fact, that the experts can pretty much tell us when each of our five senses will begin its decline. Any single person may have a different experience, of course, but in general

it goes like this: hearing begins to diminish in the mid-forties, vision and touch in the mid-fifties, taste in the late fifties, and smell in the mid-seventies.

What fifty-year-old hasn't experienced some of these changes? What sixty-five-year-old hasn't mourned the loss of sexual urgency, and with it the sense of manliness he thought was his birthright until then? What seventy-year-old hasn't looked at her body with an aching heart as she searched vainly for that smooth, slim young thing she used to know? What eighty-year-old doesn't know what it means to be tired in ways he never understood before?

If middle age is the time when the first real signs of physical change and decline appear, old age is the culmination of the process. Death, which was still a distant threat in the earlier years, is closer now. The lines time started to etch at midlife are more like furrows than wrinkles now, hair that was still half dark then is completely grayed, words more often refuse to come when we want them, memory continues to retreat until the distant past may seem closer than yesterday. We can erase the lines with surgery and Botox, cover the gray with dyes, practice memory aids assiduously, but there's no way to avoid the internal sense of loss and the sadness that accompanies old age—sorrow that's made exponentially worse by a culture that glorifies youth and sells it so unrelentingly.

If we consolidated our identity at midlife and thought the job was done, old age is when we lose it, when we have to rethink ourselves yet again, figure out who we are now that the roles and life tasks that consumed us and formed the center of our sense of self are finished. This, I believe, is one reason why those of us who are old spend so much time looking backward. "My yesterdays walk with me. They keep step, they are gray faces that peer over my shoulder," writes William Golding. And, I might add, they are also the faces that remind us who we once were. When we

turn our gaze back, we live for a moment in the reflected glory of the past, hoping that others will notice and appreciate the whole of us, not just who they see in the present.

But the deeper motive for bringing the yesterdays into today, perhaps the one that's not fully conscious, is the need to re-vision ourselves, to bring all the selves we've known through our lifetime into a new and expanded self, a self that's more than just a collection of losses, one that can live more comfortably in what is almost inevitably an uncomfortable present.