

## ELDERTOPIA

William H. Thomas, M.D.

**O**ur longevity is an ancient thing. It came into being long before the beginning of recorded history and it is intrinsic to the experience of being human. Longevity is also a matter of urgent contemporary concern. We live in world where influential voices claim that humanity's flourishing longevity is actually a disaster in the making. A string of aging-related economic and cultural catastrophes are forecast to descend upon us all.

I do not tremble before the "Senior Tsunami." It is much more fun (and useful) to celebrate the fact that we are entering into history's most elder-rich era. From the beginning, human elderhood has been protected, sustained and nurtured because it serves vital human interests. Old age exists today only because thousands of generations of our ancestors found it to be useful. Our unique pattern of longevity—we are the only creature capable of living so far beyond the period of reproductive maturity—now lies at the core of our humanity. Alone among all other creatures, we benefit from a stage of life that extends beyond adulthood. For millennia, our ancestors have

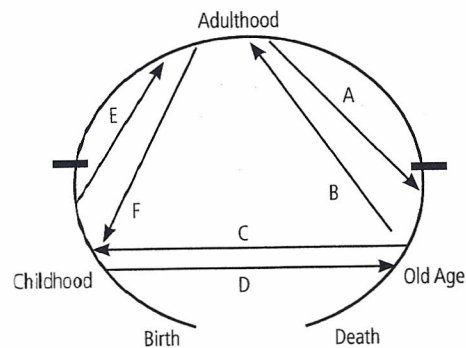
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understood elderhood to be as distinct from adulthood as adulthood is from childhood.

Life in a modern industrial society makes it difficult to embrace, or even imagine, our own elderhood. We live under the sway of a ravenous worldwide addiction to the virtues of adulthood, which, not coincidentally, also reinforces the idea of old age as tired, worn and uniformly undesirable. Old people as individuals may be laudable, but as a group they have been redefined as useless appendages to human society.

Advocates for the aged work to promote the vision of a society wherein the aged are elevated to a status equal to that accorded to the young, forgetting that the strength of elderhood lies in how radically different from adulthood it is. This dismissal of elderhood is an epic error on par with a rejection of fire-making and the wheel.



This figure depicts the intergenerational transmission of culture and assistance.

- A. Support provided to elders by adults
- B. Assistance elders give to adults
- C. Gentling and acculturation of children by elders
- D. Assistance and affection given to elders by children
- E. Participation in work of adults by children
- F. Food, shelter, clothing and affection provided to children by adults

The diagram offers a schematic representation of the engine that has powered human cultural advancement for tens of thousands of years. It has shaped us, served us, blunted our worst tendencies and magnified our best. Given the terrible might of modern industrial society, it would seem that we need this engine more than ever before. Instead, we are witness to the rise of an “anti-aging” movement — which continues to claim, despite all evidence to the contrary, that technology will soon make old age a thing of the past. Deep down, most people understand that aging is an inevitable part of life. What confounds us is the question, “What are old people for?”

Former Colorado Governor Richard Lamm adopted the classic “aging is a disaster” (for the young) perspective in his essay, “The Moral Imperative of Limiting Elderly Entitlements.” He writes, “One of the great challenges in America’s future is to retire the Baby Boomers without bankrupting the country or unduly burdening future generations... Age could well be as divisive in the next forty years.”

What is missing here is an accounting of what elderhood contributes to society. This side of the ledger is regularly ignored by those who believe an Iron Curtain exists between the wealth and vigor of adults and the ruinous burden that age imposes on the young. Lamm goes on to declare, “We are a compassionate society and we can afford a lot, but we cannot afford everything. No publicly financed health system can ignore the law of diminishing returns ... It is necessary to find, among the myriad of things that we can do, what practically in a budget we ought to do.”

Old people become expensive accessories and, while we may be a “compassionate society,” there is a limit to what we can do for them. What we need is a radical interpretation of longevity that properly values elders (and their needs) as being essential to our collective pursuit of happiness and well-being. It should not come as a surprise

that our language lacks a word that describes the interdependence that joins young and old. The wisdom of living in a multigenerational social structure is ancient, undeniable and deserving of a word of its own. I like “Eldertopia.”

**Eldertopia** / ell-der-TOE-pee-uh / *noun* —A community that improves the quality of life for people of all ages by strengthening and improving the means by which (1) the community protects, sustains, and nurtures its elders, and (2) the elders contribute to the well-being and foresight of the community. An Eldertopia that is blessed with a large number of older people is acknowledged to be “elder-rich” and uses this richness to the advantage of all.

Our longevity exists, has meaning and creates value because it provides human beings with a mechanism for improving the lives of people of all ages. Far from being society’s expensive leftovers, elders and the elderhood they inhabit are crucial to the functioning of healthy human societies. We tabulate the money spent serving the elderly to the penny but fail to appreciate the vital contributions that our longevity makes to society as a whole. We need a new and much more accurate system of accounting.

The pursuit of Eldertopia can lead us with a better understanding of how longevity completes us. For a start, it can illuminate the complex and easily overlooked intergenerational transfers that are essential to people of all ages. The “greedy geezer” stereotype can be seen as the inevitable product of a society that measures only the assistance the young grant to the old. Giving proper due to the contributions elders make to the young undermines anti-old age prejudice. Understood in their proper context, elders and elderhood can be seen as the best investment human beings have ever made.

So, what are old people for? They are the glue that binds us together as human beings. We need elders because we need families, congregations, neighborhoods and communities. We need Eldertopia because old age is a precious gift, one honed over the centuries. It exists to connect us with our past, and to our future. ☺