FULFILLING LATE LIFE? CHILDLESS MEN AGING IN SAN FRANCISCO

By

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Abstract

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by

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Much of the extant social research on childlessness in late life employs a "lens of deficiency", where it is assumed that confronting old age without children itself constitutes a precarious or problematic situation. This thesis builds on an emerging critical literature that moves beyond this perspective, and shifts focus to more exploratory considerations of the aging process for adults without children. The text documents specific means by which childless men seek fulfillment in late life, in an urban U.S. context. The study is based on two years of ethnographic research in San Francisco, California, with a total of twenty-five, independently living, white men between 64 and 86 years of age. None of the men had children, and though a few were married or had long-term partners, most lived alone. By focusing exclusively on older men's lives, the analysis redresses a conspicuous gender bias in social research centered on parental or reproductive status, where women's lives have drawn most scholarly attention.

For the men portrayed here, weighty questions about identity, family, and ultimately, social standing, remain rather unsettled in late life. Many participants

experience significant frustrations addressing such “big picture” questions, and these difficulties are often tied to social and physical environments that cannot offer the proper stage for enacting desired visions of senescence on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the men persist in attempts to establish what matters most to them individually, and seek to project a personal character worthy of respect. To accomplish this, participants work to narrate the parameters of belonging in their lives, and engage in gift/exchange relations to offer up and display their personal values to others.

The men reach out to others as they reconcile self-understanding, and some show concern for the quality of interpersonal connections available. However, such extensions are also marked by a strong ambivalence towards developing reciprocal relations, and connections are often left undeveloped in the name of personal independence. Rather than signaling resignation, this tendency to eschew full-fledged connection emerges as part of a process where commitment and desires are re-calibrated, in order to strike a novel balance that might “fulfill” aging.

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Introduction - Men Aging without Children

Opening

It is estimated that by 2030, 30 percent of the U.S. Population between the ages of 70 and 85 will be without a spouse and without children (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). Despite this sizeable demographic, anthropologists and other social scientists have taken little time to develop an understanding of living later life without children. Research on infertility has proliferated in the past fifteen years, as scholars of the "New Kinship" studies have recognized the significance of novel reproductive technologies for anthropological understandings of relatedness (Dolgin, 1995; C. Thompson, 2001). However, studies of late life, to say nothing of research on childless late life, have been largely absent from this renewed anthropological interest in how identities and relationships are performed and articulated in contemporary society.

This study aims to contribute to a nascent critical literature on aging without children (Dykstra, 2009) by presenting qualitative research on the ways that childless men fulfill late life in San Francisco, California. The phrase "fulfilling late life" is employed to connote two primary meanings. For one, it conveys the sense in which the study's men confront the challenges of the aging process, and how they try to measure up to normative expectations for later stages of life, i.e., how it is that they fulfill the task(s) of aging. As with the interrogative form used in the title

for the dissertation, though, "fulfilling late life" indexes another facet of the study's inquiry: how these men conceive of fulfillment in the first place, and what it is that they do to achieve it on a personal level, i.e., what it is that matters to them as they grow older.

The dissertation seeks first and foremost to demonstrate that, for the men portrayed here, weighty questions about identity, family, and ultimately, social standing, remain rather unsettled in late life. And while a majority of the men experience significant frustration as they enact aging selves, it was unusual for me to encounter men who were resigned to a particular "lot" in life. Rather, the men show consistent interest in narrating new scripts for their lives, and in fixing meanings that would be palatable over the long term. The pursuits and projects documented here are marked by an unexpectedly strong ambivalence towards developing reciprocal relations with others, and such connections are often left undeveloped in the name of personal independence.

Literature Review

Childless Old Age

Identification of a "Social Problem"

Much of the early social scientific work on childlessness in the United States was developed by sociologists in the 1970s and 1980s. The emergence of this body

of work coincided with a marked academic interest in documenting and analyzing the phenomenal changes in women's social lives in the latter third of the 20th century. These changes spanned the breadth of social and economic life, and had dramatic effects for individual households (Castells, 1997, Ch.4). Within the domain of fertility, for the first time modern contraceptive technology was readily available to many U.S. women reaching adulthood, introducing choice as a routine element of family planning. In an effort to gauge the impact of women's emergent choices, social research on fertility tended to employ an analytic split pitting the "voluntary childless", on the one hand, against the "infertile", or "involuntary childless", on the other (Houseknecht, 1982). This distinction emerged at about the same time as organizations such as The National Organization of Non-Parents (NON) formed in California. This group was at the forefront of a social movement emphasizing the option of a living a fulfilling adult life without children (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007).

Even within these early studies, some scholars found that the dichotomy of voluntary and involuntary childlessness could not quite capture the diversity they found in their research samples. For instance, Beckman and Houser needed to split the "involuntary" category into three, to better represent the paths her participants had taken to becoming childless (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). The weaknesses of the dichotomy were especially apparent as scholars began to consider what childlessness meant for older adults. As Dykstra and Hagestad explain, the split

cannot be properly applied to contemporary senior citizens, since it introduces elements of choice to their lives that were not widely applicable within the era when they might have reproduced (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007).

More worrisome still, scholarship addressing the issue of childlessness has followed a pattern all too familiar in aging-related research: it has been built on a "social problem" framework (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000; McHugh, 2000). Dykstra and Hagestad (2007) aptly demonstrate that an approach that seeks first to identify the problems of "non-normative" populations was firmly ingrained across a variety of literature related to the welfare of older people, and their families, well before the advent of research on childlessness itself. Following this lead, the research on childless old age has tended to begin by posing the question of how older adults without children could gain sufficient social support with the onset of frailty (Rempel, 1985; Rice, 1989). Due to the simple fact that an aging person is a non-parent, and thereby positioned outside of societal norms, such inquiry homes in all that they lack: beginning with the presumed "missing" children themselves, and continuing on to social networks, functional health, personal capital, and so on.

To the credit of its various authors, much of the early literature on childlessness actually begins to demonstrate that stock assumptions about the disadvantages of childlessness in old age were highly questionable when held up to empirical light (Houser, Berkman, & Beckman, 1984). Nevertheless, this literature remained largely contained by the assumptions embedded in this dominant

discourse, which Dykstra and Hagestad call a "lens of deficiency" (2007, p.1291). In other words, though scholars began to suggest positive aspects of living a life without children, their scrutiny remained informed by the fact that childlessness was perceived as problematic in the first place. As a result, regardless of the novel findings being reported, childless men and women end up assuming the familiar position of the vulnerable "Other".

"A More Nuanced View" in Social Gerontology

More recent treatments of childless aging within sociology and social gerontology have begun to tease out an approach that replaces the "social problem" approach with inquiry that is more exploratory in nature. In her article, "Beyond Parental Status", Koropeckyj-Cox (2002) moves inquiry forward by proposing a new typology to assess what, if any, specific qualitative relationships pertain between parental status and general well-being for older adults. She divides childless survey respondents into two groups based on the feelings they express about the overall propitiousness of living without children. Those participants whose stated views were positively related with their own lives (i.e., they had not deemed childlessness an unfavourable status) were classified as "congruent", while those who saw clear and distinct advantages to a life led with children were

marked as holding "incongruent" views.[1] Having systematically earmarked these differences in childless people's attitudes, Koropeckyj-Cox then compares propensities for depression and loneliness in the resulting statistical "groups" as a whole, and searches for further significant correlations with respect to variables such as gender and marital status. As the author suspected, the numbers suggest that women with "incongruent" perspectives – they had agreed that growing old as a parent was preferable to aging without children – were markedly more susceptible to leading unhappy lives. Those who expressed views that were fairly consistent with a positive assessment of their own situations – they had disagreed with the statement that parenting made for a better old age – were indeed less prone to a troubled existence. The author explores the case of older men as well, and finds that the tendencies are much less clearly defined. In fact, Koropeckyj-Cox (2002, p.962) concludes that there were really no significant relationships between men's responses to the general question about parental status and the indicators that they themselves suffered bouts of depression.

Though an extensive reliance on survey methodology weakens these findings to some extent,[2] Koropeckyj-Cox's study does help to illuminate the fact that there

[1] Koropeckyj-Cox creates a similar breakdown for the study's respondents who were parents, but the differentiating factor was the extent to which the parent maintained close relations with his/her children.

[2] It is not clear that Koropeckyj-Cox can justifiably draw the definitive conclusions she does from having asked people to respond the following statement on a survey: "People who have had children are better off than those who have not" (2002, p.961). This is not at all to say that the strategy is bereft of analytic possibilities, but merely that responses are open to a wide range of

is diversity within the category "parental status" that needs to be recognized. In particular, her research demonstrates that gender difference makes a significant difference in the lives of older Americans without children. The study supports the view that women are more closely bound to pronatalist imperatives than are men, though it also shows that there are women who are able to maintain a high self-esteem despite social judgment of their childlessness. It also demonstrates that the situation is more ambiguous for older men; although a significant number of older, childless men agree that they would have been better off having children, it does not seem to have affected their overall mental health to have remained childless.

As co-editors of a recent special issue on the topic of childless old age for the *Journal of Family Issues,* Dykstra and Hagestad (2007) have also been at the forefront of the attempt to produce a more "nuanced view of older adults without children" in social gerontology.[3] The authors provide an insightful review of different bodies of literature that effectively reduced childlessness to a social problem. They distill what they take to be the premise that drives the widespread concern about childless seniors: "[it is] based on the premise that family roles provide connectedness to society, through different types of social integration: webs of interaction and network support, roles, norms, and social control" (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). The authors point to different threads of anthropological

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interpretive play, and that this needs to be seen not only in relation to other views, but also to a respondent's quotidian praxis on a broader scale.

research that serve to counter this premise by expanding the definition of family, and propose that their own research shows older, childless research participants with "…strong, durable family ties: to parents, siblings, cousins, nieces, and nephews" (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007, p.1293) In another article on childless men's lives also co-authored by Dykstra, the authors find that much of what has been reported as differential welfare due to differences in parental status was, in fact, at least partly attributable to marital history (Keizer, Dykstra, & Poortman, 2009). These scholars report that while older, childless men tend to be at an economic disadvantage when compared to their peers with children, it is also the case that these men are more likely to consider themselves happy and satisfied with their later years.

The Cultural Dimension

Robert Rubinstein and his colleagues at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center were among the first anthropologists to steer scholarship on childlessness away from the "social problem" mould. Rubinstein (1987) served as the lead author for a special January 1987 issue of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, where he and his colleagues took pioneering steps in employing a more exploratory approach to the lives of childless seniors.[4] In part, an ethnographic style of research featuring in-depth interviews helped these scholars to skirt the overriding concern

[3] See also (Dykstra, 2009).

[4] See also (Rubinstein, 1991).

with the vulnerability of childless seniors. More crucial, however, was the fact that Rubinstein adopted a "constructionist" methodology, and was thereby able to recognize that experiences and perceptions of childless seniors were heavily marked by various facets of their surrounding environments. Rubinstein's introductory article (1987) announces an initial step that builds on this novel methodology; namely, to study childless old age in different cultures.[5] Among the substantive pieces in the journal issue, Zimmer's analysis of the childless elderly among the Gende peoples of Papua New Guinea is particularly instructive. The author not only depicts the entrenched institutionalized bias faced by older men and women without children in Gende society, but she also documents the changes in the structural aspects of the local economy that resulted in a "de facto" childlessness for many individuals who, in fact, were biological parents (Zimmer, 1987).[6]

Sangree's contribution to the *CCG* volume is also valuable, since the author profitably uses a comparative grid in order to document the meaning and practical effects of childlessness for older adults in two African societies. In particular, Sangree demonstrates that in these locales, "…Childlessness per se is not the issue for the elderly. Achieving full adult status by the time one reaches the age of

[5] See also (Kraeger & Schroder-Butterfill, 2004) for a more recent edited volume specifically covering European and Asian experiences of aging without children.

[6] See (Schroder-Butterfill & Kreager, 2005) on the concept of "de facto" childlessness, and (Lamb, 2000) for a cultural context where "sonlessness" is the operative social location conferring stigma.

elderhood is what is at issue. Parenthood is overwhelmingly important to elders in both Tiriki and Irigwe not for economic support in old age, but because it is a crucial aspect of adulthood, which in turn is a prerequisite for being truly accepted as an elder" (Sangree, 1987, p.222). In his conclusion, Sangree dismisses any significant interconnection "between parenthood and elderhood" in Western societies; children as status markers cannot have much purchase since, in his view, neither kin ties in general, nor elder status itself, are especially significant in the grand scheme of Western lives (1987, p.222). Although Sangree's assertions are undoubtedly correct in relative terms, I contend that his insight into the symbolic importance of parenthood – rather than merely its practical benefits - is more salient to the lives of older North Americans than he expects.

Though she has little to say about childlessness in old age, Elaine Tyler May's work deserves special mention in any summary of scholarship pertaining to the lives of childless individuals. A professor of American Studies, May's book *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (1995) documents shifts in American attitudes toward childlessness, and thus demonstrates the strengthening ties that bind fertility with ascription of U.S. Citizenship. She claims that, despite many changes in the effective motivations for procreation, Americans have a continuing obsession with reproduction and childbearing. Lest these ideals be seen as evidence that the nation-state is truly devoted to its children, May points out that, in fact, U.S. government policy has

shown a consistent hostility to the welfare of children that continues to this day (May, 1995, p.16). The author's primary focus in on how the promotion of a child-inclusive familial unit as a symbol of the virtuous life has affected the lives of those women who never did conceive. Most compellingly, May traces the history of sterilization abuses in the U.S., documenting the concerted efforts to prevent generations of women from giving birth. The author demonstrates a marked shift from criteria that foregrounded the class and sexuality of women deemed unfit to parent in the early 20th century, to an increasing targeting of women of colour for such abuses (May, 1995, p.97).

Gender Differences in Childless Late Life: Adding Visibility for Men

Childless Generativity

Beyond providing the impetus to study childlessness in different global contexts, Rubinstein and his colleagues have also published work that looks specifically at how older American women without children think about what they will leave to those who survive them (Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1991; Rubinstein, 1996). The authors borrow and revise a theoretical framework put forth by the eminent psychoanalytic historian, Erik Erikson, employing the term *generativity* to characterize the phenomenon they are interested in. They explain that, "generative action is, among many things, a symbolic act, though not necessarily a conscious one, aimed at creating an

enduring and infinite self through an investment in the other" (Alexander, et al., 1991, p.437). In their studies, the behaviour under scrutiny is comprised of activities ranging from memoir writing, to mentorship, to literally passing on heirlooms.

In their primary paper on the topic, the authors note that Erikson's original formulation "tacitly assume(d) the universality of parenthood", and [in response] their research objective is to seek out alternative forms of generative practice in the lives of seniors who are not parents (Alexander, et al., 1991, p.420). Despite this search for alternate forms, the authors find that "...almost all women without children of their own [in the study]…consciously and systematically sought out parental roles as outlets for generativity, whether through their jobs, neighbourhoods, churches, or with nieces and nephews" (Alexander, et al., 1991, p.420). According to these authors, in the US, the scripted narrative of motherhood is so strong that women who are not literally mothers still employ the model to pass on personal value(s).

This body of research demonstrates rather convincingly that an elderly woman is liable to face an ambivalent situation when faced with physical finitude in America. The resources and narratives available for imagining a "future" are limited at this stage of the life course (Vesperi, 1985), since "…the continuity of the individual beyond death has no institutional structure…" (Alexander, et al., 1991, p.438). As such, the authors propose that individuals assume the responsibility for

securing this continuity of their own accord; to wit, “with the growing consciousness of death that comes with increasing age, affinities (in this case, primarily with children) become emblematic of the self. Individuals inscribe their personal identity through these affiliations, and, as such, the whole becomes symbolic of the part" (Alexander, et al., 1991, p.434). Ultimately, they conclude that what Erikson himself interpreted as altruistic behaviour is, in the American context, more accurately read as “self-absorption in a culturally sanctioned form” (Alexander, et al., 1991, p.438).

This research on generativity provides a welcome foundation for substantive exploration of the lives of childless seniors. However, in these studies, Rubinstein and his colleagues focus almost exclusively on older women without children. Beginning with an exclusive focus on women remains a credible choice, even in retrospect, precisely because of the strong moral components to motherhood in America. Moreover, any judgment about the exclusivity of this research is assuaged on two fronts: first, as we will see, Rubinstein published an entire monograph on old men living alone (Rubinstein, 1986); second, leaving men out of research on childlessness (or scholarship with any such reproductive component) remains, to this day, a fairly common omission.

Gender Bias? Old Men Trickle in

The neglect of men in this domain of scholarship is less egregious today, but the research remains thin. As mentioned above, Keizer and colleagues have

published an article that focuses explicitly comparing the "life outcomes" of older men with and without children (Keizer, et al., 2009). Koropeckyj-Cox has also published one preliminary piece with a more direct focus on the circumstances of older, childless men. Her chapter in Gubrium and Holstein's reader, *Ways of Aging,* presents the stories of three old, married men, who had never had children. The author proposes that hers is deliberate attempt to counter the fact that older, childless men are "doubly invisible", since researchers have not only tended to document the lives of the "predominantly female elderly population", but those interested in topics with a reproductive focus have also focused on women almost exclusively" (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2003, 78).

Koropeckyj-Cox finds that the childless men that she interviews demonstrate a clear measure of concern for both the process and outcome of their reproductive lives. While each individual shows a different response to growing old without children, when prompted, all three of them articulate a distinct involvement in the decisions or circumstance by which they ended up childless. The author also finds, however, that the fact of being childless is not at the forefront of the thoughts of her interviewees. Instead, the men she speaks to show a primary concern with the welfare of their wives, and what they see as their own responsibility for any suffering these women experience. This emphasis on the husband's role, and mere reactive engagement with procreative matters, leads Koropeckyj-Cox to conclude that there is a "…lesser salience of parental status in the life stories and self-

assessments of older men"(Koropeckyj-Cox, 2003, 92). She does so with marked hesitation, however, and is careful throughout the paper to point out that her findings are provisional, and far from representative. She insists that there is a great need for further research, and a greater diversity of research, problematizing the lives of older, childless men.

It is not only among scholars considering parental status in old age where a need to look at men's lives has recently been acknowledged; several researchers have pointed out that men's lives had been conspicuously absent from much of the general social scientific work on aging up until fairly recently. Anthropologist Peter Stephenson believes that this has partly been a simple matter of overcompensation. According to him, a "masculinist" bias in aging studies was challenged forcefully by feminist scholars starting the 1970s, so that "the past twenty years have yielded a massive increase into research on the lives of older women", and this has "...left our view of elderly men frozen in time" (Stephenson, 2001, p.1).[7] British sociologist Jeff Hearn takes the point further, claiming that the neglect of old men engenders (and is engendered by) a situation where this segment of the population is now written out of societal scripts: "…older men are also defined by virtue of their earlier death than women. Older men are constructed as pre-death. They are relatively redundant, even invisible, not just in terms of paid work and family responsibilities, but more importantly in terms of life itself" (Hearn, 1995, p.101). Right around the

time that Hearn expressed these views, however, a renewed interest in the social analysis of older men's lives emerged. Thompson's edited volume, simply entitled *Older Men's Lives* (E. H. Thompson, 1994), seemed to open the floodgates for this scholarship, to the extent that, at least within the academe, it is increasingly questionable to proclaim the "invisibility" of older men.[8]

Older Men, Beyond Childlessness

Inspired, in part, by a traditional anthropological interest in "marginal" populations, Rubinstein (1986) and other anthropologists[9] managed to publish important work that preceded this wave of research on old men. Recognizing the yawning gap in the literature, Rubinstein conducted an ethnographic study of older men[10] who lived alone in urban Philadelphia. Roughly half of these men were socially isolated, while the others, though they lived independently, engaged in regular social interaction at senior centers and other public places. The author makes a special effort to focus on any change his participants experience in later life, as he believes that, "If successful aging is anything, it is the successful management of change based on each individuals recognition of needs and realities" (Rubinstein, 1986, p.16). Rubinstein finds that, of all the transitions experienced by the men in his study, widowhood was the most disruptive; for those

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[7] See also (Russell, 2007).
[8] See the following for examples: (Eckert & Rubinstein, 1999) (Fleming, 1999; Meadows & Davidson, 2006; van den Hoonaard, 2007)
[9] See also (Cohen & Sokolovsky, 1989).
[10] Their mean age was approximately 78.

who had lost a spouse, it was "*the* salient event of late life" (Rubinstein, 1986). In comparison to other participants, Rubinstein shows that widowers were often unable to successfully re-organize their lives to confront old age, and experienced loneliness directed related to the loss they had experienced.

Rubinstein's fourth chapter homes in on a sub-sample of 11 men in his study who were never married (subsequently NM).[11] The author reports that a majority of these men had at one time earlier in life been very close to kin, and had felt an "acute sense of abandonment" after the death of key family members (Rubinstein, 1986, p.130). Nevertheless, while several of these men suggested that they occasionally felt lonely, this was clearly less of an issue than with the widowers in the research sample. In his attempt to grapple with these findings, and with a theoretical concept of loneliness itself, Rubinstein considers the idea that, for NM men, there is a sense that loneliness is pre-empted by a chosen withdrawal, where individuals embrace what he calls "voluntary, individualistic marginality". He cites Hartog's view "that nonconformists of all sorts try to deny their innate loneliness by

[11] Rubinstein presents his findings as a critique of research on "single elders" published by well-known social gerontologist Jaber Gubrium (Gubrium, 1974). Gubrium sought to establish that single elders "constitute a distinct personality type in old age." Rubinstein gives a thorough outline of Gubrium's thesis, which rests, in part, on the idea that single elders escape a common problem among the married (and especially the widowed) elderly - namely, searching for "self-validation" through coupling. According to Gubrium, single elderly have "solved the lifelong problem of self-validation" in ways other than through marriage, and so are able to avoid feelings of desolation, etc. As such, single elders not only avoid bereavement if a spouse dies, but since they are generally "lifelong isolates", they are not especially lonely in old age in the first place. Gubrium adds that the age "stages" of the life course are not especially relevant to single elders, since they avoid locating themselves at any one period of life, i.e. There is no need to hearken back to romantic past, since "life seems to go on as it always has" (Rubinstein, 1986, p.127).

their own voluntary, individualistic withdrawal from society," and connects this to NM older men, who "for whatever reason, cannot bring themselves to enter into mainstream social life"(Rubinstein, 1986, p.188).[12] Most interesting, for the purposes of this paper going forward, is Rubinstein's finding that "for each [of the 11 NM men] there was a conflict between a desire to be alone and not to be attached to others, and a desire for contact." In his fourth chapter, he illustrates this tension with a particular informant, who "…has a need for contact; [but where] contact should not be too intimate to be satisfying." The author offers the outline of an explanation for such behaviour later in the book: "It would seem that for many of the men social contacts remain peripheral because of a fear of dependency on others or of spending too much time in an undesired environment" (Rubinstein, 1986, p.213). Many of the study's men conveyed that personal independence was a personal point of pride, but Rubinstein indicates that "NM men are more completely emphatic in their insistence that independence is a desirable commodity" (Rubinstein, 1986, p.212).[13]

[12] Rubinstein also references a study that reflects a potential overestimation of "loneliness" in the elderly population in general: from the "Louis Harris survey on aging" that the general population sees loneliness among elderly as "very serious" problem (60%), where relatively few (12%) of elderly see it this way. He also concludes from his own data that the "elderly as a group do not seem to suffer overly from loneliness" (Rubinstein, 1986, p.199). Somewhat ironically, his team of researchers still saw the NM population as lonelier than they self-reported, more so than with any other segment of the sample.

[13] Rubinstein and his colleagues extend this exploration of the ethos of independence in another study considering the lives of frail seniors living alone in urban Philadelphia. They report that the ideology "continues to be germane and vital to those whose circumstances are constrained", but that its manifestation is substantially different from that enshrined in cultural ideals. Rather than

Outline of the Argument

Dykstra and Hagestad astutely indicate that, by employing a "lens of deficiency" to analyze childlessness in old age, much of the research on the topic has itself been deficient. To begin developing a more critical literature on the topic, the authors seek to rebuke the premise that only family roles can provide social connectedness in old age. I believe that this can be a helpful solution to correcting a strong bias in the literature. However, I would also like to suggest that the problem runs deeper.

I argue that limitations to research on childless old age, and aging as a whole, also stem from the fact that the notion of being "connected to society" is glossed over rather too easily, so that it does not appear to ever be in question whether there might be anything but a positive connotation to the phrase. Biggs indicates that old age researchers either tend to stick with a "social problem" orientation, or instead shift 180 degrees to adopt a stance that highlights only the positive aspects of growing older (Biggs, 2003, p.145). These polar opposites are, in a sense, the two sides of one Janus-face, and they often need one another to find traction. Before "connection" is accepted as an unmitigated good, I believe that it is necessary to explore just what exactly we mean by the term, lest we make further assumptions about people's lives, and in particular, their desires.

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casting out towards "…broad open spaces, whole lives, [and] long vistas…" the men and women in their study re-double their focus on the day-to-day, to garner freedom through the "miniaturization of satisfaction" (Rubinstein, Kilbride, & Nagy, 1992, p.146).

This dissertation aims to bring this exploratory agenda to fruition by considering the ways that childless men narrate themselves and engage with others in late life. Most of the men do, in fact, regularly reach out to others, but these moves to connect often play second fiddle amidst broader efforts individuals make to establish identities they can live (and die) with. The men seek to demarcate the distinctive values they have become attached to, and to project a personal character worthy of respect. To accomplish this, participants in the study generally became engaged in one of two processes (although several men were involved in both): (1) They worked on "figuring family", or establishing the parameters of family and relatedness in their lives to address questions of belonging; (2) They reconciled self-understanding via gift/exchange relations, and specifically the extent to which they could offer up personal values to others.

Overall, the gesture and narration that formed the core of these late life performances looks somewhat different from what one might expect. Despite the fact that men were occupied with fixing attachments to a family, or to sharing their values, few were busy establishing or maintaining reciprocal relations in their lives. In fact, several of the men took pains to avoid "getting involved" with others, and instead worked to narrate their status and belonging by other means. This does not mean that the study's men eschewed intimacy altogether, or that they were totally satisfied with the connections they did have. Several men did express disappointment with their limited opportunities to connect with younger adults, in

particular. Again, though, despite this lament, many men resisted the sort of bonding that might have given them the chance to pursue enduring relationships. As a result, men in the study often participated in abbreviated exchange relations, making do with interpersonal encounters that were rather fleeting.

Many of the men were determined to maintain self-reliance, and for some this endeavour was integral to attaining the kind of respect they were after in late life. Some men held this up as an ideal they had embodied throughout their lives, and others fought to drive away looming dependencies as they grew older. This attachment to an independence ideal does not, in itself, explain resistances to "getting involved". Yet it does help to demarcate the balancing act many of the men attempted in late life: a determined preservation of independence, on one side, and a simultaneous search for openness in others, to best project a desired self-image, on the other. It is, of course, rather difficult to maintain equilibrium in such a project, in part because it near impossible to control what others ask of you, and think of you. Often enough, the result was that the men bypassed the messiness of intimate relations, and rested content finding brief occasions to share what was important to them.

While the complexities of relationships can perhaps be obviated by keeping others at arm's length, such a tact did not always make the task of finding late life fulfillment any easier for many of the men I met. For most, there were complicating factors over and above finding the right balanced level of engagement with others.

Most men found themselves at least somewhat dissatisfied with the social possibilities afforded by the physical environments they navigated on a daily basis. This includes the alienation people sometimes felt in their own residences, but was primarily a sense of disillusionment in the places where the men received social services of one kind or another. One participant in particular, Ray (Ch. 6), has a strong antipathy for his near-daily visits to a facility where he receives health care treatment for several ailments. More commonly, men find the senior centers they frequent to be rather inadequate as venues for helping them to create the late lives that they desired. Though the men were generally grateful for the inexpensive meals they received at these sites, they were also prone to complain about the age segregation that dominated their lives. Beyond these external constraints, some men had to try to rid themselves of unwanted elements of a self that originated in another time of their lives, but that had remarkable staying power into senescence. This could make it so an individual constantly struggled to "make up" for a particular stigma, as with Walter (Ch.3), who felt eternally indebted by financial assistance his mother provided him over the years.

Partly because such entrenched life scripts are not readily shaken, some men ended up looking for ways to transcend them, seeking the path of least resistance towards fulfillment. Here is where study participants were prone to invoke rather fantastical storylines depicting scenarios that, while unlikely, did indeed symbolically activate important desires. One man dreamed of spreading his

Buddhist values to end all strife in the world; another man spoke of someday seeing his grandchildren, though he had never had any children. Precisely because they are so far-fetched, these enactments are relatively immune to the frustrations of disappointment. Moreover, by reaching out, in a sense, beyond the possible, one practically guarantees finding the openness necessary for solving the riddles of social identity as one approaches death.

From one angle, the forms of interaction and narration documented here appear fairly narrow in scope. They are comprised of families without intimacy, gifts without reciprocation, and mere fantasies of fulfillment. I contend, however, that taken together, the scale of the late life performances undertaken by these men is actually remarkably broad. In other words, vital questions of personal identity remained up in the air for most men involved in my study, rather than fixed by the sediment of time.

This does not mean that these men were able to freely reinvent themselves as they grew older. Far from it: most of the men were struggling to digest traces of the past on a fairly consistent basis. But it is precisely within this dynamic that weighty questions of self-worth, social standing, and overall fulfillment reside and persist. Rather than settling, and resigning to their lots in life, these men consistently activate the big picture of their lives, to see if they cannot yet be arranged to look more like what they would expect for themselves.

Research Design and Methodological Issues

Fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted in San Francisco, California over the 2003 and 2004 calendar years. This section provides an overview of how the research project was initiated and conducted, and gives a thumbnail profile of the men who shared their time, views, and stories to inform what is written in the work as a whole.

I outline the specific approach I took to become immersed in my research topic, and in the lives of the men who participated in the study. In other words, I lay bare here what inevitably becomes blurred with substantive descriptions and analytical claims in the dissertation: how I managed to situate myself as a participant observer to engender the ethnographic process, and what sometimes prevented me from doing so. This section communicates three main strands of information. First, it conveys a sense of how the research process unfolded in both spatial and temporal terms; this includes an anonymized sketch of the primary physical and institutional sites that were integral to the study, as well as major steps in the overall sequence of research events. Next, it describes the methodological tools employed to come up with the "material" that informs the write-up. Finally, it provides a brief collective profile of the participants.

1. Research Sites and Sequence

(a) Recruitment and Initiating Fieldwork

The study's launch was hampered by a minor methodological puzzle: how to find and recruit a research sample using eligibility criteria that have little relationship with any organic "group" in the real world. In other words, a study of childless men in their later years faces the impediment that there is no club, association, or institution that is formed around the characteristics of being old, childless, and male. In fact, I found that even for those who routinely traffic in the statistical side of social analysis, notorious for its reifying tendencies, a "childless senior" is an unknown species. Prior to commencing fieldwork, I thought it would be a good idea to seek out current numbers on my "population" from San Francisco's "Office on the Aging", a city agency charged with ensuring the well-being of the county's senior citizens. When I called and posed a query about local "childless seniors", the city employee on the other end of the line could only respond with his own question: "Childless seniors? What is that?" Before I could mount a full explanation of what my project was, the man on the other end brought the conversation to a succinct close: "We don't have anything like that!"

Faced with such an amorphous ethnographic "people", I needed to start big, as it were: I initiated the study by developing a research presence at three different centers in San Francisco that cater to seniors. Although these sites were all located within a radius of about five miles, the clientele that they served differed on a

number of levels. To begin with, one of my points of entry was an extension program sponsored by a LGBT non-profit organization, rather than a senior center in its own right. Somewhat limited in its scope, this program provided a space for older, gay individuals to come together every couple of weeks to share conversation and a meal. Because the bi-monthly meeting is housed on the downtown premises of a separate senior center, the gathering always had a slightly dislocated feel to it.

The two other physical sites I frequented at the outset of research were, in fact, senior centers. But while they both officially welcomed all manner of individuals over the age of about sixty years, one is housed in, and sponsored by, a Jewish community center. As such, it caters primarily to Jewish seniors, though this is not exclusively the case. The third site, the Bay Center[14], is one of two senior centers operated by a longstanding San Francisco non-profit organization. It has no affiliation with any one population group, ethnically-based or otherwise, but the clientele who frequent the center come from a higher socioeconomic bracket than clients at its sister center located in San Francisco's downtown.

Directors at each of the senior centers helped to arrange my introduction to the regular clients, and routine access to the physical buildings that housed center activity. They also put me in touch with on-site social workers, and with other staff members and volunteers who were familiar with the clientele, so that I could

spread the word about my study. My primary contact at the LGBT lunch was the social worker who facilitated the gathering, and he also assisted me in making my research interests known to attendees. In fact, this social worker arranged to have me make a short presentation about my research to the lunch group in the summer of 2002, before I had even moved to San Francisco to conduct fieldwork.

Recruiting participants for the study was a challenge, and the process was somewhat more protracted than I had anticipated. However, it would undoubtedly have been a great deal more difficult without the assistance of these employees who acted as go-betweens at the various sites. This is true, in part, because it was often only with their direction that I was able to determine which seniors had never had children. Sometimes clients themselves were able to identify others in their midst without children, but this was certainly not always the case.

(b) "Up and Running" Fieldwork

At the LGBT lunch meetings, I helped out serving coffees and prepared lunches fairly regularly, but was never appointed as a volunteer in any official sense. I did take on this role at the two others centers, albeit in slightly different capacities. At the Jewish senior center, I began my tenure by helping to conduct a small survey of the clientele for the director. I assisted in gathering basic demographic information from the center's members, and this allowed me to get to know some of the attendees a little better than otherwise would have been the

[14] The names of centers have been altered to preserve anonymity.

case. After the survey work was completed, the director asked me whether I would facilitate a men's group on the center premises. This had been my primary role at the Bay Center as well, where I had been asked by the center director to take over a group that had already been formed prior to my arrival. The Jewish center's director heard me talk about this group, and wanted me to start a similar group for her older male attendees. I discuss the different group sites in the following section on *data collection tools*.

I served as facilitator for each of the men's groups for a period of approximately six months. At the Jewish Center, I was able to hand over the reins to another student interested in aging issues. The Bay Center's group was a small gathering to begin with, and the director decided to end the meetings when it became clear that it was a stretch for either of us to continue serving as facilitator. I continued to attend the bi-monthly LGBT lunch meetings throughout the period of my research, as they did not take up as much of my time. In 2004, the second and final year of my fieldwork, I directed nearly all of my energy to spending time with participants outside of the centers. This data collection is also described in the following section.

2. Data Collection Tools

The ethnographic text I have produced relies heavily on two overlapping types of encounters with participants: (a) semi-structured, one-on-one interviews; and (b) informal interaction with participants in their homes or in public places.

(a) Interviews

Formal interviews generally lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, and loosely followed the schedule reproduced in Appendix A. The order of the questions varied considerably based on the perceived interest of the participant, and it was not uncommon to skip segments of the schedule altogether if alternate lines of inquiry proved more fruitful. Moreover, as a majority of the participants were formally interviewed on at least two separate occasions, specific lines of questioning omitted in an initial interview were often picked up in a subsequent one. As a general rule, the first interview was used for documenting the following socioeconomic information: age; amount and source of monthly income, or other means to a living; current residential status and location, as well as form of household organization; marital status and history; employment and education history; hobbies, and other regular projects; relevant senior centers and organizations; frequent interpersonal contacts, and the physical proximity of these individuals to the participant's home.[15] Second and subsequent interviews afforded me the opportunity to extend lines of thought that seemed to preoccupy participants, so that I could see what mattered to them most. I sought to home in on any particular "projects" participants were involved in, be it largely solitary endeavours, or rather the institution of regular social exchanges. This follow-up

[15] See also "The Basics" in Appendix A.

interview also gave me a chance to speak with participants about how they viewed their childlessness. [16] [17]

Interviews were most often conducted in participants' homes, though occasionally they were conducted in coffee shops, or on the premises of community centers. I call these encounters "one-on-one" interviews and, for the most part, this label is accurate. However, there were a handful of occasions where a friend, family member, or care worker was present during the interview. This scenario usually produced a different conversational dynamic, but it also sometimes revealed aspects of a participants' life that had been concealed in the one-on-one encounters. Because of this, while I expressed a preference for a simple two-way conversation with participants for the formal interviews, I also did not strongly resist proceeding while others were present.

A majority of participants agreed to have their interviews tape-recorded. In all cases where the recorder was not used, individuals permitted me to substitute handwritten note taking during the interview. In two separate cases, I took the impetus of shifting from the recorder to handwritten notes in the early stages of an interview, as it was clear that the participant was uncomfortable with the use of the recorder in spite of having agreed to its use. It should be noted that this routine of

[16] See also "The Extras" in Appendix A.

formal recording and note taking applies primarily to the formal interviews. As I outline below, much of the time I spent with research participants was more informal in nature, and during this interaction I often deliberately avoided making real-time recordings of any kind. Though I was chastised by one participant for this approach - shaking his head, he repeatedly implored that "you always need to have a notebook and pen in your shirt's pocket" - I found that it was important to foster a different, less formal conversational flow to better understand the rhythms of life experienced by the men who participated in the study.

(b) Participant Observation

Formal interviews played an important part in the study, but their primary purpose was to serve as a stepping-stone to less structured encounters with participants. Indeed, while interview transcripts are particularly helpful for illustrating the study's multiple narratives, a great deal of the material used to write the chapter profiles is derived from contexts more casual than the interviews themselves. To be sure, conversations remain at the heart of this dissertation, but often these took the form of informal chats while waiting for lunch at a senior center, or while a participant tended to daily chores in his home. Only one of the men involved in the study was still employed, but several of them volunteered, so I

[17] Though participants in this study were asked about the extent to which they considered their parental status to have been determined "by choice", this query was not made in order to explore personal decision-making processes *per se*. Rather, I included this question in many of my interviews to discover what such a framing might reveal about a particular individual's self-image, or possibly also a retrospective view of emerging intimate relationships or sexual identities.

occasionally interacted with a participant at the church or community center where he helped out. Despite the fact that a couple of interviews were conducted outside, I spent very little time out of doors with research participants. Meeting indoors was usually more practical, but I tended to encourage it for more than just this reason: I was intent on seeing the men's homes, and observing them in other indoor physical sites where they socialized.

When I was not helping out while at the senior centers, I commonly sat with the attendees engaging in informal discussion. At most of the sites, I would also eat lunch with the older men and women, as it proved awkward to disrupt the flow of social interaction by retreating once meals were served. There were many individuals in attendance at the centers who were not involved in the study, but it was generally easy enough to sit at a table where one the study participants was dining.

Apart from community centers that housed seniors' programs, and participants' homes, I occasionally joined individual men in other publicly- or privately-accessible venues. Restaurants and coffee shops were easily the most frequent alternative meeting sites, but such interaction also took place in the following locales: churches; grocery stores and farmer's markets; libraries and historical societies; a nursing home; a group home for disabled individuals; a social security administration office, and the archives for a performing arts center.

(c) Group Discussions

As mentioned above, I was involved in several discussion groups during fieldwork. Two of these were men's conversation groups, and did not involve any meal component. The other group was the LGBT seniors' lunch group; this gathering was structured around a shared meal, but group discussion was facilitated by a social worker both before and during the lunch. All three of the group meetings generally lasted somewhere in the vicinity of one-and-a-half to two hours, and met roughly twice a month. I met several of the men who became research participants in these groups, and the meetings added to my understanding in two ways beyond serving as a recruitment mechanism of sorts: (1) they allowed me to observe individuals who had joined the research in a setting unlike any others I had seen them in; and, (2) they provided me with comparative insight into the lives of men who were not involved in the study, including those who did have children.

My involvement in the two men's group discussions was primarily as a discussion facilitator, and the two separate gathering were fairly similar in structure. Both had small numbers of participants, usually ranging from between 3 and 6 men. The age span in both groups was extensive, incorporating men from their early sixties to others in their early nineties.

At both venues, I began meetings by seeking out a group member's "burning share", meaning some issue that they were anxious to discuss with the group.

Subsequently, we followed a routine check-in around the table, to give each member a chance to update the group on what was preoccupying him at the moment. Following this round of catching up, I would generally propose a theme to discuss for the day. Topics were far ranging, including anything from talking about household pets to news items with global resonance.

Discussions at the two groups differed significantly, both in substance and in tenor. At the Jewish center, politics was a favourite for the agenda, and debate became rather heated at times. At the Bay Center, we did discuss politics, but the men rarely became argumentative. Partly because the center's director had encouraged the format, group members were fond of telling jokes, and would try out new material each time we met. Finally, neither group had a strong sense of a particular *raison d'être* as an exclusively men's group. Several men at the Bay Center believed that it was important to create a space for men only, primarily because the numbers of women at the center always handily outstripped the numbers of men. However, I made a point of pressing the issue with members of each group (i.e., Why a men's group?), and failed to engender much discussion.

The LGBT lunch group was mainly comprised of gay men, though there were 2 or 3 lesbian women in regular attendance. It was a much larger group than were the men's groups, and it was not uncommon to have 25 attendees. Members of the group occasionally took field trips to see local attractions together, usually if there was a third Wednesday in a particular month. A shared meal made this much

more than a discussion group, but the most noticeable difference from the men's groups was a self-conscious sense of purpose as a collective that came together to share experiences as gay seniors.[18]

(d) Other Data Sources

Fieldnotes

Due to the fact that I did routinely forego recording during time spent with research participants, it was important to take detailed notes after taking leave of them. I sometimes did this directly upon returning home from a research rendezvous, but most often I compiled fieldnotes first thing the subsequent morning. This morning ritual became an important part of the fieldwork itself, and I developed the routine of logging reflections about the research whether there were new specifics to record, or not. Often the resulting text amounted to little more than a typewritten "to do" list, but it nevertheless served as a useful aide to gauging the development and direction of the research, especially in retrospect. It also provided a safe space for venting personal frustrations about the fieldwork process, and for exploring the emotional elements of engaging in such a process.

[18] This is the group that I spent the most amount of time with during fieldwork. The general feeling of the group was camaraderie, but this was almost always cut with another sense that individuals were somewhat on edge. Group members sometimes parodied AA group meetings: people would sometimes begin their check-in with "Hello, my name is so and so, and I'm… gay". The members were mostly lower income, but this certainly was not a condition of joining – it was first and foremost a forum exclusive for gay seniors.

Media Monitoring

Throughout the research period, I consumed a variety of different media to systematically track general issues related to aging, to old men's lives, and to living without children. I routinely consulted local newspapers such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *San Francisco Examiner*, but also frequently considered what was reported in these areas in national and international papers, websites, and magazines. San Francisco also has a number of small "alternative" and "community" publications; among these, I commonly perused *SF Weekly, the SF Bay Guardian,* as well as the LGBT-specific *Bay Area Reporter*.

3. Study Sample

Having described the recruitment process and my data sources, I will now outline characteristics that both define and differentiate the resulting study sample. By the time the research was complete at the end of 2004, twenty-five men had formally participated in the study. All but two of the men were interviewed on a minimum of two occasions, but there were vast differences in the extent to which I interacted with individual research participants. Men whom I had met earlier in fieldwork generally ended up as "core" participants in the study, though there were exceptions to this rule.

As it stands, my final analysis relies heavily on an understanding built up from interviews and other interactions with a subset of eight or nine men. From these, I chose to write up chapter profiles of only five men. Encounters with other

participants with whom my relationship was less fully developed certainly remains salient to the analysis, but it does not afford the same depth of understanding that comes with checking in with someone over an extended period of time. As such, data rendered from interactions that consisted primarily of formal interviews is treated with much less conviction, with a significant effect on the ensuing interpretation.

By further elaborating demographic parameters of the sample, one is quickly faced with the limits of information gathered about participants who were recruited near the end of the study. To wit, ten participants in the study identified as gay, and eleven men reported that they were straight. However, there were also four men for whom I do not have an expressed sexual preference. All of these men joined the study in the latter half of 2004, and I neither found the occasion to ask them directly about their sexual orientation, nor did they offer information about the matter. While, to be sure, this information does pertain to the study, I report this limitation unapologetically, as I much prefer accepting the shortfall in knowledge to hastening to pry into aspects of participants' lives that they were unprepared to share with me.

All of the men participating in the study were white, and U.S. Citizens[19], but came from families with various ethnic backgrounds. They were also all, by social convention, considered senior citizens, despite the fact that participants' ages fall

along a fairly broad spectrum. The oldest man was born in 1918, and the youngest in 1940. Marking the chronological edges of the collective is somewhat misleading, however, especially on the older end; in fact, there were only two men in the study born before 1925. There was a large cluster of men in their seventies (b. 1925-1932), and another slightly smaller group in their mid- to late-sixties (b. 1934-1940). To add some historical perspective, the older cluster was comprised of individuals who were generally approaching their teenage years when the United States entered the Second World War. Members of the slightly younger cohort of men were at a similar point of their youth when Americans entered the Korean War. Both sets of men were born well before the onset of the Baby Boom in 1946.

A majority of men (15 of 25) were living month-to-month, on fairly restricted, or fixed, incomes. For the most part, this meant a strict dependence on a combination of government entitlements and welfare benefits. Most men received Social Security retirement benefits in direct relation to their own previous employ. There were several cases I documented, however, where a participant received either a survivors' benefit - drawing from a deceased parent's entitlement - or instead a benefit received in conjunction from a disability that had eventually prevented them from working. Several of the men also received the joint Federal and State funded Supplemental Security Income (SSI), to complement their retirement benefit; here, the recipients secured eligibility by age (over 65),

[19] Four men were born outside of the United States, but had become naturalized citizens.

independent living situation, and the fact that their average monthly income was below $500.

Ten study participants had income at their disposal beyond what they drew from government insurance programs. This additional income generally either came from an employer-sponsored pension program, from savings accumulated in treasury bonds or certificate deposits, or from property rentals. A majority (7 of 10) of these men were also themselves homeowners. There were a higher proportion of gay men in the month-to-month, fixed-income category, and all of men currently living with partners (3) had relatively high disposable incomes. Nearly all of the men had completed high school (22 of 25), roughly half of the men (13 of 25) had at least some post-secondary education, while 3 men had completed advanced degrees.

A very high proportion of the men lived alone, and this was especially true of the men on fixed incomes: 13 out of 15 lived alone and none were married or had partners. The primary shared characteristics for all of the men are that they are White, over 63 years old, without children, and living independently in the city of San Francisco.[20]

[20] One of the participants lived in a group home, but he categorized his housing situation as "living independently".

Chapters Summary

Each chapter in the dissertation features a singular profile of a man who participated in the research. Presenting the material this way made it easier to consider my encounter with each man in a thorough way, while simultaneously allowing me to explore theoretical components of the study from different vantage points. This style of write-up also prevented me from relying to any great extent on direct comparisons between men's lives, which would likely have ended up ringing rather hollow. Like Rubinstein (1986, p.229), I believe that it is important to remain mindful of the uniqueness of each participant's life situation, and dividing the chapters as I did helps to represent this contention.

The process I term "figuring family" is introduced and explored in chapters 2 and 3. Identifying the nature and quality of one's membership in a family proved to be a central task for many of the men, despite the popular notion that kin-work is accomplished earlier in the life course. For the majority of participants, family specifically denoted living siblings and/or extended relations, or parents and other blood relatives who had already died. The few men who had steady partners in their lives were exceptional in this respect, and there were also instances where individual men made a point of using the term family to label non-blood relations.

The relative stability of the terminology can appear to suggest that this domain is devoid of active reckoning, that family is a fait accompli that only ebbs and flows with births and deaths that alter its membership incrementally. In fact, however,

these men with no direct descendants continue to consider both whether there are others who truly fit the description of family, and initiate and sustain practices that serve to fix or destabilize these familial identities.

The complexity of the process surfaces immediately in chapter 2, where Stanley, a gay man in his late seventies, helps to illustrate the twists and turns involved in enacting belonging in late life. His appears to be a happy case of renewed relations with blood kin in late life, but the material residues of other, meaningful attachments, betray the sense that all things family are not what they should be. Stanley's attitudes also help to open the inquiry to ideologies of independence and self-reliance, which, in his case, seem somewhat ill suited to solve the riddles of relatedness.

In chapter 3, Walter's multiple frustrations with fulfilling late life help to demonstrate the entrenchment of narratives of self-understanding in old age. A single man in his early seventies, Walter remains mired in a narrative emphasizing his own failure to have extricated himself from long-term financial dependency on his now-deceased mother. He continues to find himself "living the lives of others", figuring that he needs to pay for his ultimate inability to take care of himself. Walter is also caught up trying to "right wrongs" when it comes to broader family responsibility, where he sets himself the unlikely task of keeping his family name "alive" by having children. Walter's steadfast aspirations to change the big picture

of his life remain disarming, however, and this rhetorical ploy is further scrutinized as a means of enacting hope.

An urge to "give" or "help out" also emerged as a common thread for the study's men, and chapter 4 considers this impulse in light of a prevailing ethic of "volunteerism" for America's senior citizens. William, in his late sixties, makes a habit of giving small material items to others, but curiously resists receiving any form of reciprocation. Because of this ambivalence about exchange, and an unorthodox manner of giving, the form of William's "contributions" is somewhat illegible on its own. However, the specific nature of the material given and displayed reveals that, in part, William is set on announcing his cultivated tastes to others, and this facet of his practice best illustrates a late life search for respect and distinction.

"Fulfilling" aging is sometimes frustrated by the social and physical spaces that become naturalized as "seniors' space", and chapter 5 begins with 72 year-old George's lament about his infrequent contact with younger individuals. Despite this interest in expanding his social horizons, George is a passionate meditator and metaphysician, and, like William, he demonstrates a healthy ambivalence about "getting involved" with others. Though protective of his independence, he is also clearly involved in a quiet, but determined, search for a spiritual protégé. Ultimately, George believes his path to fulfillment is a solitary one, and he rests content with only the occasional opportunity to share his values.

The last substantive chapter, number 6, follows Ray, a disabled man in his late seventies, as he seeks out companionship in late life. Like Walter, Ray feels trapped by various aspects of the identity that has built up through his life. The fact that Ray has had substantial success in his work career does not seem to make the path to late life fulfillment any easier to accomplish. He expects, in old age, to be able to sidestep some of the imperatives defining his life as a gay man, but finds himself disappointed. Ray's body also serves as an obstacle to the senescence he seeks, but he does, in the end, find a satisfying way of extracting value from it.

The conclusion draws out for further scrutiny a puzzle that runs through the work: the complex relationship between the desiring self of late life, and the accumulated experience that has come before old age. Contrary to the confidence and capacity evoked by popular usages of the term "experience", the study's men show that "experience past" becomes present in a wide variety of accumulations, not all of which dovetail with a fulfilling senescence. Here, I discuss the difficulties of methodologically parsing the relevant temporalities at stake in the lives of the study's men, and consider possibilities for incorporating humility within anthropologies of later life.

Chapter 2 - Stanley: Residues and Renewals of Relatedness

Introduction

In one mode of parlance, it is said that an individual with no children has no family. Of course, this way of framing matters takes only one aspect of family into account, namely, reproducing a "next generation". It neither speaks to the sense in which each individual is born into a family, nor does it allow for consideration of other ways of making families (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007, p.1281).

In the past two decades, anthropology and other related disciplines have played host to a burgeoning literature re-examining notions of family and kinship, and documenting previously unacknowledged forms of what has been termed "relatedness" (Carsten, 2000; Franklin & McKinnon, 2001). Much of this literature examines the figuring and refiguring of intimate bonds by younger adults, and on how such activity is prescribed by cultural and legal norms. Though it is never made explicit, the reason for this emphasis on youth is fairly clear: it is assumed that the critical moments for establishing belonging occur in the early and middle years of adulthood.

This chapter helps to extend the renewed investigation of kinship, showing how varieties of relatedness are also constituted in later life. Many of the older men who participated in this study spent time trying to resolve the nature and extent of

their family ties. In addition to not having children, the parents of most participants were dead, and few of the men had current partners. As a result, other than non-blood "made" kin relationships, only siblings, cousins and other extended kin were potentially available as living family. Some of the men had decided that the matter was simple: they did not have much use for family, especially the one they were born into. Others placed great importance in family belonging, and could hardly think of themselves outside of such a normative schema. Even strong pro-family sentiments did not always translate to a tangible maintenance of intimate connections with kin, but were often manifest in an intense adherence to the *idea* of lineage. Overall, the men's attitudes were mainly found somewhere in between these extremes of rejection of, and devotion to, family. This appeal to a "middle ground" may appear facile, but it signals the primary finding developed here: that the matter of family remains somewhat unsettled for the older men in the study.

Most men sought to make "claims" to family (Weston, 2005, p.131), but this process was neither as empowering, nor as seamless, as this language implies. By their words and deeds, these old men enacted narratives of belonging, but the telling and retelling of such tales could pose significant risks. While family scripts can help to bring to life particular images of a fulfilling old age, the following illustrations show that they can also expose fissures between a desired senescence and the lived experience of aging. In other words, casting out to confirm belonging can also easily reveal gaps in the family ties one believed to be present. In the

cases that are the focus of the two following chapters, we find that invocations and enactments of family are rather uneasily intertwined with a pursuit of personal independence. Each in their own way, and to different degrees of success, the men featured in this and the following chapter recount persistent efforts to stave off undesirable dependencies just as they articulate a form of familial attachment they also hope to realize.

A Fresh Start

"I was 42 at the time, and I realized that there was nobody that was going to take care of me" – Stanley, 78 year-old man.

With this opening quotation, I repeat words uttered by a man recalling a turning point in his life. In the mid-1960s, Stanley, a native San Franciscan, had just returned to the city of his youth. He had spent much of his twenties and thirties moving between jobs, and between various parts of the United States. Stanley had learned skills in bookbinding along the way, but this trade, in his words, "had gone out of business". Stanley's journeys had afforded him the time and relative anonymity to explore his sexuality, and as a result he had become more comfortable identifying as a gay man by the time he had returned. He developed more than one close, intimate, relationship in his travels, but ultimately none would last long enough to convince him to remain elsewhere. Stanley informed me

that when he returned, the only family he had living in San Francisco was comprised of two "aunts", whom he would see for holiday meals. Apart from these singular gestures to include him in seasonal celebrations, Stanley had virtually no support from kith or kin upon his arrival back to his natal town.

Stanley's mother died when he was a teenager, and his father, from whom he had grown apart, would subsequently pass on at his home in the Midwest as well. His siblings, a sister and a half-brother, were busy making their own way, and had both moved away from Northern California. The men with whom he had developed loving partnerships through the years had all, in his words, "gone straight and married", and he was no longer in regular contact with them. Stanley had no trouble making friends, but his companions were "always younger"; as a result, they were often less able than he to support themselves as adults. Finally, the aforementioned "aunts" were actually older friends rather than blood kin who, while they were hospitable, did not really offer familial support. In truth, this modicum of distance suited Stanley. As he suggests here, he did not want these women taking too keen an interest in his life.

> S: They were sympathetic, but the reason we got along so well was because they weren't nosy or inquisitive…weren't trying to figure out when you're going to get married, where you were working at.
>
> D: You didn't want that?

S: I'd got away from that. I had that where I used to live. I wanted to be independent; so, because I wanted to be independent, I had to suffer! (Laughter)

Stanley derived amusement from revisiting his earlier life dramas, but it is clear that he had truly been at risk of facing sustained hard times "going it alone" upon his return to San Francisco. However, it was not long before he sized up what he needed to do to avoid personal destitution. First, since his skills as a bookbinder appeared to be increasingly obsolete, he surmised that he had to take work anywhere he could get it: "…I ended up stuffing envelopes for a group like Goodwill, a group called Morrison at the time. And I had certain jobs, from 8 in the morning until 11 at night for about thirty-five dollars a week". With these meager earnings, Stanley could initially only afford to live in an SRO hotel[21] in the Tenderloin district.[22] As he recounted to me, the situation had been bleak, and he had needed to extricate himself from it:

D: Where is that (SRO)? Farther downtown?

S: Geary, down in the Tenderloin, next to the Remington Hotel…and it still has the terrible vile green color to the facade, only it has bars and gates now… and I stayed there.

D: Was that all right?

[21] Single-Room Occupancy

[22] Always at the center of the city's homelessness controversies, the section of downtown San Francisco known as "The Tenderloin" has also long been an area of the city where men and women have sought affordable temporary housing.

S: No it wasn't all right, it wasn't all right…then I eventually just walked down Geary there, until I reached Masonic and I saw this hospital, and I went in and made myself an application for the housekeeping. And the lady there said, "Well, we don't have anything", but I said, "I'm going to be here at 7 in the morning for the next 3 months". And I was there at 7 in the morning for about the next 4 weeks.

D: Even though they had said…?

S: Right. 'Cause I thought that I was going to work with her, 'cause we got along. She was a Pisces too, and I said, "You're just going to be stuck with me, 'cause I'm going to work for you". But she said, "But we don't have nothing". So after four weeks, she said, "All right, we've got a job that nobody wants, it's in the basement, in the laundry".

Stanley managed to retain his position as a laundry attendant at the hospital for twenty-five years, only finally leaving in 1988. As one might expect, the pay he received for this menial work was underwhelming. With equal parts pride and self-disparagement, Stanley liked to announce that, "the most [money] I've ever made is $8.50 an hour". However, the steady job afforded Stanley his prized independence, and a new place of his own.

Two of Stanley's younger friends had proposed to him at the time that they share the cost of a large apartment – Stanley called it a "palace on wheels" – but he was determined to remain self-reliant. He found a more modest place that he could pay for himself, and invited his friends to stay rent-free. That way, as Stanley put it, "whatever they wanted to do, they could do", and he made sure that his solvency was not going to depend on anyone else's. Stanley indicated that he had learned earlier in life that when it came to financial matters, it was a mistake to depend on

others. He explained that his mother was simply terrible with money: "She spent it all. So I decided I never wanted to do that, never wanted to have to rely on someone."

Daily Life as an Older Man

According to Stanley's own way of partitioning his life, the "second half" was the entire period that followed his return to San Francisco at 42 years of age. He differentiated it from his earlier life by a transition to responsible adulthood and, in particular, the forethought to plan for his own long-term welfare. Nevertheless, the following shows that the trajectory of Stanley's later life does not fit neatly into the stereotypical image whereby Americans "settle down" in mid- to late-adulthood. His emphasis on taking charge of life, and maintaining a strong work ethic, was, however, still noticeably present when we first met in 2003. Stanley was one of the few men participating in this study still working when we first met, and he took his job seriously. He served as the building manager for a 3-storey apartment building on a street heavy with vehicular traffic where he lived near San Francisco's City Hall. Though he had moved apartments within the building, it was the same place where he had first moved in 1965. During my fieldwork, Stanley shared a 1-bedroom rental unit with Bill, a friend nearly twenty years his junior. Stanley woke up most mornings at five-thirty to clean the block outside the building, and spent a good deal of time on weekdays running errands of one sort or

another for tenants or for the owner of the building. In return for his caretaking duties, Stanley needed only pay a low portion of the total monthly rent for his unit.[23]

During the period that I knew him, daily custodial duties kept Stanley busy around his building, but he also took time to socialize fairly regularly. In fact, he and I first met at a meal-and-discussion group for older gay men and women, and he frequented these bi-monthly meetings as often as possible. Stanley was well liked at the group, and he had known a few of the men prior to having joined the gatherings on a regular basis. Each time the group got together, individuals in attendance would each have a chance to contribute to a discussion theme chosen by the facilitator, and then to report on any news they wished to share from their own lives. In the group setting, it was rare for Stanley to do much more than "check in" very briefly, usually to convey the message that he was fairly content with life. He would occasionally add to conversations, express sympathy, or join in laughter when others would share their comments and stories. Overall, though, Stanley was reticent in the semi-public forum, and this contrasted with his affable personality in one-on-one interactions. When I noted the discrepancy with his public persona, Stanley explained that he preferred to keep most personal matters to himself in the

[23] Stanley was paying $300/month in 2003, while the market rate was around $1250.

group setting, and he only rarely found occasion to divulge intimate details of his life.[24]

Perhaps part of Stanley's reserved style of presentation in the group was due to the fact that he was somewhat unfamiliar with socializing with peers his own age; he told me on many occasions that his friends had always been younger. In fact, despite the fact that he would occasionally hang around with members of this seniors' group, Stanley insisted that he still did not "have any friends my age". He regularly made weekend visits to see one younger male friend whom he had known for several decades, but this was the extent of his regular visits to other people's homes. He much preferred to have friends stop by during a weekly "open invitation" to his apartment on Sundays. In the handful of times I myself took Stanley up on the Sunday offer, my visits crossed with two other visitors who had come to see Stanley on separate occasions. One man was clearly much younger than Stanley, and the second man was perhaps ten years his junior. Inevitably, Stanley also knew several of the tenants in the building he managed, most of whom were quite a bit younger than Stanley, but he made no special effort to socialize with them.

[24] Shortly after Stanley passed away in early 2005, I attended a meeting where group members reminisced about him. While many individuals had kind words to say, what was most striking was the fact that people he had known for years knew very little about his life outside the group. One man who did know him well spoke about Stanley's legendary hospitality, his love for certain television serials from the 1960s, and about how he would do anything to avoid hospital visits. The general reaction amounted to a collective shrug, and one man even said, "Really? I guess I didn't know him that well."

Stanley also found some time to help out with volunteer projects; for instance, he occasionally helped members of the LGBT seniors' group stuff envelopes for mass mailings they sent out. However, he explained to me that he had grown weary of the volunteer scene for a couple of reasons. First, he was overwhelmed by the increasingly officious culture around helping out, and likened getting involved to applying for a paid job. Second, he disliked overbearing volunteer "leaders" he had run into at the seniors' group; as he put it, "I'm not for volunteering, unless everyone is a volunteer." Stanley enjoyed the company in these different settings well enough, but he was not above a little mockery of the lunch group we attended together. He and his flat-mate, Michael, would occasionally have a good laugh about the group's name, which was fairly hokey, and at the very idea of a group of "old queens" getting together.[25] And though he relied less than some of the others on the provisions received at the gatherings, he still appreciated being served a lunch at the gathering; as he pragmatically put it, "a free meal is a free meal".

Stanley's health had its ups and downs. He was strong enough to perform the maintenance labour for his building, and with no vehicle, he was accustomed to walking when he had errands to run. However, he also had a colostomy bag that was a permanent reminder of a period of intense illness nearly fifteen years prior to our having met. The fact that he had worked in a hospital for more than two decades gave him a rather unique perspective on medical matters. He was

[25] The name of the group is deliberately omitted here to preserve anonymity.

determined to avoid becoming what he called a "cash cow" for medical corporations, and so he avoided the doctor as much as possible. Though he knew that he was at an age where he could easily suffer complications from illness, his mantra remained, "if I don't have no pain, I'm not going to do nothing". On one occasion he showed me that several of his teeth that were very loose, but explained that he would "just let them fall out". When he was forced to pay a visit for medical care - often to the emergency room, because he would wait so long - he was often irritated by the fact that doctors would never fully explain what his medications were meant to do for him. As a patient, he would joke with nurses that he knew that they were just trying to get all the money back that he earned in wages as a laundry attendant. However, to Stanley, the complaint was lodged only half-jokingly. He was seriously concerned that out-of-pocket expenses beyond his Medicare coverage would rob him of his personal savings, and prevent him from spending his money the way he wanted to.

Stanley accumulated modest sums of money from interest on investments he made in US Federal savings bonds while he was still working, and in later life he used some of this to supplement his income from a modest pension and partial social security benefits.[26] Stanley's roommate was fond of chiding him for being a little "cheap", but in fact he was not especially frugal. Still, he explained to me that

[26] Stanley received 80% of his social security, or $850/month; he received $324 a month for his pension.

it was very important to him that he was able to choose what to spend his money on. Stanley primarily liked to do his shopping by mail-order catalog. He did not have a computer, but the catalogs afforded him a convenience similar to online shopping, where he was able to see pictures of the items he considered purchasing. He often bought DVDs, as he especially liked to watch old television serials, and at one point during my fieldwork he bought himself a new digital system on which to play them. Stanley's spending was hardly extravagant, however, and he was at no real risk of being taken advantage of by aggressive marketing other scams that prey on seniors (Bensinger, 2004).

"Mother Hen"

Although Stanley did not own his one bedroom apartment, he had lived in it for more than half of his 78 years, and the space had truly become a home to him. Once, while discussing the role religion plays in the lives of many older people, Stanley mentioned that he figured he didn't need it because he'd found inner peace amidst the solemnity of his own residence. The first time I visited, I was struck by the density of things surrounding me in the main room where Stanley ate, slept, and received visitors. Not only were the walls chock full of a variety of artwork and other framings, but as my eyes adjusted to the relative darkness of the area, they happened upon what seemed to be an infinite series of objects – books, binders, bowls and other knick-knacks - set in and amongst the furniture of the room in a

fairly orderly way. When I commented on the concentration of things, Stanley merely nodded, and said that he would likely fill in all the gaps in space even if he lived in a much larger home. He pointed out to me that, as he got older, he was more sanguine about letting things go in the apartment. He led me into to his bathroom at one point to show me significant water damage to the ceiling; since he had grown weary of trying making repairs in his own place, he said he was just going to let it "fall down". It remained clear, however, that he still cared a great deal about his place. The stylized presentation of personal objects and images in the flat, on its own, signaled a close connection between the space and its inhabitant.

While the apartment was truly Stanley's place, it was actually "home" to two inhabitants. As noted above, Stanley had a flat-mate: Michael, who is in his fifties, and had lived in the apartment off-and-on as a boarder and friend for twenty-seven years. Michael mainly kept to himself when I would visit, remaining in the front room of the apartment, often playing video games. However, his presence was always unmistakable, as he was in the habit of chain-smoking cigarettes. Early in his stay, Michael had been only one of many younger men and women (though mainly the former) who lived on a temporary basis with Stanley, in a period spanning from the mid-nineteen-sixties through the end of the nineteen-eighties. Though Stanley acknowledged that these young adults were technically "other people's children", he would always refer to them in a proprietary way as his

"kids". According to Stanley, there were often so many people staying with him at once that mattresses were routinely set up in the basement of the building to accommodate everyone at night, and called the arrangement "…just another form of surviving, really". Stanley allowed this younger group to stay free of charge because he enjoyed the companionship. He explained to me that there were two or three sets of "kids" who stayed with him, corresponding to different overlapping timeframes. Over the years, Stanley had, on occasion, had intimate relationships with one or other of the boarders, but any sexual connections had never led to a long-term partnership.

For the most part, Stanley had remained in the singular role of the household provider; according to him, the boarders "had food on the table, and a place to stay. If they wanted a job, they could go and find one. If they wanted they could use the telephone… they had a TV, and a bath and shower". In return for his benevolence, Stanley expected his guests to fall in line with a simple set of rules that he put in place: Boarders could neither drink alcohol nor take illegal drugs on the premises. These rules stemmed not from a particular moral compunction of Stanley's, but rather from an awareness of his own risky position. He explains:

> S: If they did anything I didn't like, I would tell them 'if I don't do it, you don't do it' – and that was smoking in my house. I don't want you smoking doobies[27] here. If I have to take a lie detector test… and it comes up with 'did you ever have doobies in the house?'…'cause I'm an old man

[27] Marijuana

[by]now, and I'd get in trouble for that. You don't hear about this now, but in them days they were.

D: Oh really?

S: Oh yeah, it was big time news. I don't want to be on the front of the paper, because you don't have any sense.

D: Yeah, that's a bad way to go.

S: 'Cause I can't protect myself. What am I going to say? That I didn't do it? I'm the gayest thing in town, and I didn't do it? [laughter] Who's going to believe in me?

Along with this legal risk, there were other inevitable complications and dangers that came with his willingness to assume a guardianship role. First, the quasi-parental role wore him down psychologically, as he often felt sorry for himself for having to taken it on. In particular, Stanley used to "kick himself" for not going out to take part in the nightlife enjoyed by his younger companions. Second, it was evident that Stanley spent a lot of time and effort dealing with his "kids'" problems. He commonly posted bail, and provided other forms of assistance, for these men and women who frequently got caught in the clutches of the criminal justice system. And while he downplayed this aspect, Stanley conceded that he also had to consider the possibility of physical harm to himself:

D: So Stanley, some of these… like you said, this guy, he seemed to be getting a little bit dangerous…

S: Yeah, but that was because he was taking too much drugs,

D: Right, but you must have run into this all the time?

S: Yeah, but not where they think they're God. [Laughs]

D: Did you run into situations where you feared for your…

S:…For my life. No. I never, I never, ah…. Yeah, I did, to tell you the truth. There was this one guy Scott. He had something, whaddya call it, in the brain, deranged… I was scared of him one time, one time. But I was by myself, I didn't have anyone around, you know. Nobody was over there. Michael wasn't there, no one was there.

Finally, Stanley had been financially taxed: he regularly lent money to his younger charges, and only very rarely received any payment in return. Stanley said a lump sum of bail money was the only money that he ever had returned to him in full in all the years of lending. All in all, Stanley's generosity was staggering. He provided free room and board for dozens of young men and women, and he still seems to have managed to take on a greater nurturing role with many of the lodgers as well. He indicated that some of the young men and women were ultimately unable to take what he was offering; either they could not let themselves take advantage of him to such an extent, or rather they believed that it was simply too good to be true, i.e., that surely something would be expected of them in return for the help Stanley provided. In retrospect, Stanley understands this reaction, adding only that they "didn't realize that their unique personalities were enough for me…" Even so, Stanley also conceded that the overall calculus in the exchange was not as simple as a straight trade of material support for companionship. He certainly did

appreciate the companionship his "kids" offered, but he also indicated that there was an additional element that mitigated the myriad challenges of serving as the "mother hen". Continued exposure to the carefree lives of his younger friends allowed for some continuity with "first half" of his life, but it was primarily beneficial, according to Stanley, because it helped him to maintain the sober attitude of his new lifestyle. He put it to me plainly: "I needed them to show me how I didn't want to be". His "kids" were always getting into trouble – some legal, some personal - and Stanley suggested that it was important for him to repeatedly witness the messiness that ensued. In so doing, he had constant reminders that he was better off steadfastly remaining in the "second half" of life that he himself had enacted.

Stuck in Place: Residues of a Past Life

As I noted earlier, when I visited his apartment, it struck me immediately that Stanley had taken pains to sort and arrange the material goods he kept on display. As it turns out, Stanley was a collector and a documentarian. Books and various albums were stowed neatly in cases, and Stanley had a considerable collection of VHS videos that he kept in a wire case that hung in a closet off the main room in the apartment.[28] Stanley also had an eclectic collection of artwork that filled the

[28] Stanley also kept jewelry in a box that was locked up in that closet, but he only once showed me a couple of pieces of it.

walls in this same room, and small curios fairly covered the dining table and other available surfaces and cabinets.

Amongst his collections, Stanley still kept scrapbooks, logs, and photo albums where he documented much of what transpired during the "Mother Hen" period. Some of the binders were no more than a jumble of old photos, but others were more specifically categorized: one photo album he called his "Aids file", and it included pictures of many of the men he'd known who were casualties of the epidemic; [29] another was mainly pictures of the first set of "kids" that stayed with him; still another was a scrapbook of clippings from local newspapers, which he had saved to "know what was going on in the world". Perhaps most prominent, though, were dozens of binders with astrological details about particular individuals. Stanley enjoyed reading people's stars, and it seemed that he had kept records of nearly every one of the hundreds of individuals who had ever passed through his apartment.

Stanley also kept several detailed logbooks from this bygone era. He explained to me that he had begun by merely recording the sums of money that he had lent out to different individuals; these jottings covered dozens of pages, and there was probably a loan entered every other day. Eventually, Stanley decided to

expand the scope of the record, however, and from this point the logbooks assumed the form of something closer to a personal diary. Stanley kept many of his scrapbooks and logbooks readily accessible, but he also insisted that he really had only saved a small percentage of the records he had originally made.

Stanley enjoyed providing annotations to the photos and text, as we flipped through them together. After we had sat down at the lighted table in his dark, main room, it typically would not take long before he would rise to pull one of the binders off its shelf, even when I had not asked specifically about this period of his life. He presented photos of the young men and women who had used his apartment as a breathing space between adventures that appear to have been centred on street hustling of all kinds. Stanley would occasionally refer to one or other of his boarders as a "doper", and it was clear that many of them used and abused illegal drugs. He was less explicit about whether his kids sold drugs or sex - they certainly did not use his apartment to do so - but several of the stories he told involved individuals caught holding or selling a variety of contraband items, from knives to non-transferable passes for the local transit system. Some "kids", especially those who were mentally unstable for one reason or another, were caught making ends meet in a marginal urban environment because neither their

[29] Given all the talk about drug abuse and hardened street lives, I found it surprising that the pictures were generally of boys looking quite innocent and attractive in a wholesome way. I also thought it was odd that he was presenting an "Aids file" to me, after having earlier told me that the disease had "not really had an effect on my life". I questioned him about this statement anew, and

parents nor the public hospitals would have them. Stanley spoke little about whether, or to what extent, his kids were involved in thievery, but if one considers the items that "disappeared" from Stanley's own apartment, one has to assume that it was a significant element of securing a livelihood. He nonchalantly read off this list from a logbook: door knocker, clock, tape deck, kitchen knives (6 of the 8 he had purchased), picture frames, a graduation ring, and a jar of pennies. Stanley also read breezily through the logs that marked the near-daily occasions when he had loaned money to one of his boarders, and showed me court records indicating where he had vouched for the legitimacy of his "kids'" falsified rent receipts, when they needed to provide a fixed address to receive public benefits.

These documents and mementos were clearly quite meaningful to Stanley, but they also served as reminders of the fact that the vast majority of his "kids" were long since gone from his life. This disappearance was not absolute; as noted already, Stanley was still in regular contact with one younger gay man, Yanik, who previously lived at his apartment. Now in his 50s, Yanik is a technical writer for a major Bay Area software company. Like Stanley, he lives near downtown San Francisco, and Stanley keeps up a longstanding tradition of paying his friend a visit every Saturday. According to Stanley, their relationship has not changed a great deal from years past - the two have a warm friendship, and Stanley provides his

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Stan explained that few of these boys had actually lived in his apartment, so in this way he didn't consider himself to have been affected personally by their deaths.

younger friend with emotional support and advice. Yanik is from a Mormon family, and he broke away from the church to come to San Francisco in the early 1970s. Yanik's family has never approved of his life choices, but Stanley helps him try to communicate with his father, who lives in Utah, over the internet. Though Stanley was not explicit about it, it emerged that gestures of support did not simply travel a one-way street in this relationship. Stanley had to be hospitalized for a health condition at one point in late 2003, and he informed me that Yanik had helped him to get admitted at the hospital. In times of need, it appeared as though Stanley could rely on Yanik to provide him with assistance. And no matter how divided an existence they lived, Stanley was clearly also in daily conversation with his flat-mate, Michael. He explained, however, that Michael showed little interest in revisiting the past, and that they certainly never looked at the old documents together. Overall, such extended connection his "kids" was highly unusual for Stanley as an old man. And the documents he held on to drew only rare, fleeting interest from individuals connected with this past:

S: I put 'em away, or if their wives come by, and want pictures…

D: Oh really?

S: Yeah, after they die off, or…

D: Oh, okay.

S: I keep 'em. Danny's wife, had two children and…

D: She wanted to ask for photos of those years?

S: No, well, they don't want anything to keep…

D: Sure – they just want to see.

S: They don't want correspondence, or a long-term relationship. They just, it's just…"we wondered"…

D: What the story was?

S: Yeah.

D: So, that happens frequently, or…?

S: No, not frequently at all. I'm still waiting for some of these guys, for somebody to come by to ask about…

Stanley claimed that that he had always known that few of his "kids" would be around as he got older. He rolled his eyes as he repeated the line he had been fed decades earlier: "… 'oh we'll take care of you if anything happens – we're here, you know' [laughs]". I did not spend time tracing the life trajectories of Stanley's kids after they had left his apartment. From what Stanley told me, though, several of the men died young, sometimes of Aids-related illnesses. Some of the men who ended up in straight families with more conventional lifestyles, kept their past lives, and particularly any homosexual relations, secretive indefinitely, or until an untimely death occurred. On the rare occasion that Stanley did have someone visit to find out what he knew, it was often a member of the biological or affinal family that came to have Stanley to fill in some of the blanks. Stanley found such

posthumous investigation somewhat curious; for the most part, he chalked it up to one of the differences between kin in the heterosexual world, and "made", gay families: "Blood does that, see, they seem to hold on…more than we do." Stanley explained that he often recounted a cleaned-up version of a man's life for his relatives, since he figured that it wouldn't do any good to reveal unsavoury details: "Of course, it was what they wanted to hear, not the truth. You know, things like 'Jimmy went to church regularly', and nothing about his trouble with the police." While Stanley had certainly lost track of many of the "kids" who had passed through his home, there were many that he knew were still alive. He found that many of these men and women wanted to maintain a clear break from their previous "transient" lives, in order to preserve newly forged commitments to families or to work. Stanley described one instance where he successfully helped a young man named Chad return to reintegrate with his parents in Florida. Stanley had cared for the man who had temporarily, but definitively, lost control of his life because of frequent LSD use. Stanley convinced Chad to agree to a set of conditions his parents insisted on upon his return - mainly having to do with appearance and drug use - and was subsequently rebuffed when he tried to visit Chad while he was in Florida for other reasons:

> S: Sure enough, he went back to Miami with her, and me and my Aunt went down in '78 – she was picked woman of the year for something or other down there – and we stayed at a hotel…. We went over to the office where he was at, and…no, first we went to his mother's house, and she

said " well, he doesn't want to see you", and my aunt she said, well she couldn't understand that, and said "after all you did for him"… so she said "we'll go over and see him". So we down to his office, and he was there in a suit and tie, doing all these things, working for Coca-cola at the time… and one of the vice-presidents, or something…

D: Wow! So you did find out what happened.

S: So…He just said that he wasn't interested, and, you know, didn't want to remember what had happened…[yeah] that's all right – so we parted company and that was it.

Whether or not they had managed to settle into lives where they could take care of themselves, most of Stanley's kids had "moved on", effectively severing relationships with their former "mother". Stanley said that he understood this desire for separation; again, he was fond enough of insisting that he had always known the hollowness of his kids' pledge to care for him as an old man. Yet despite the certainty that resonated in his voice as he made this statement, its very repetition sometimes made it seem like Stanley himself still needed convincing that it had come to pass.

A Right to Choose?

At one point in our conversation about the "kids" he had taken in, Stanley announced to me that "I've made more people family than the family I have." This is a statement that should not be taken lightly, since his blood family is fairly extensive. However, Stanley insisted that he had had kin-like relations with dozens of younger men and women with whom he had no biological connection,

explaining that it is "…easier to make your own family, because then it's your choice." Anthropologist Kath Weston (1991)and other scholars studying queer relatedness helped to popularize the notion of "chosen" families, a concept that gained currency in gay communities in the Bay Area by the mid-1980s. By introducing a term that appears oxymoronic through a conventional lens, this body of work extended Schneider's critique that helped to expose the ethnocentrism of the conceptual apparatus of kinship studies in anthropology (Schneider, 1980 (1968))[30]. At the same time, Weston's research undercut Schneider's emphasis on the core symbol of heterosexual intercourse in America. Once a variety of forms of *assent* were recognized as means to authenticate family relations, blood *descent* became only one way to constitute kinship ties, making it so "…anyone can 'work' to turn a relationship in kinship" (Weston, 1995).[31]

The "New Kinship" that has emerged on the basis of such conceptual innovations has stressed the contingent nature of relatedness, and replaced metaphors of structure and system with those of practice and process (Levine, 2008, p.377). However, these theoretical developments have drawn increasing criticism from more than one ideological camp. British anthropologist Daniel Miller

[30] Scholars have rightly pointed out that Schneider's critique of grounding "natural facts" like reproduction was, in fact, not something completely new to anthropology. Franklin and McKinnon indicate that such analysis was "…widely articulated across a range of anthropological debates from the 1960s onward" (Franklin & McKinnon, 2001, p.3).

suggests that a common emphasis in the "new kinship" studies on processual metaphors such as "negotiation" risks throwing out the baby with the proverbial bathwater. He worries that there is "...a danger...of swinging the pendulum too far in the opposite direction until the other end of the kinship spectrum, that concerned with formalisation, normativity and fixity, in turn disappears below our gaze and we actually lose the appropriate sense of balance represented by this new work" (Miller, 2007, p. 537). Miller does not mean to diminish a novel recognition of flexibility as far as how families are constituted, but he is loathe to give up an element of prescription, or, as he puts it "…that we behave in a given way toward a spouse or a child, simply because they are a spouse or a child, irrespective of the actual experience of the particular relationship that we have with them" (2007, p.538). Less amenable to what he sees as the overall project of the "new kinship studies", Warren Shapiro recently published a scathing critique of this work that draws on the work of pioneering linguistic anthropologist Alfred Kroeber. In a single tract, Shapiro dismisses the analysis of several anthropologists as little more than blind "scholasticism" that seeks mainly to affirm the legacy of David Schneider's corpus (Shapiro, 2009, p.8). The author pokes holes in the ethnographic evidence put forth in three separate texts, and expresses a general

[31] Franklin demonstrates that there remains a tension in Schneider's work between the a symbolics of nature he delineates, and a remaining realm of biological facts; as Carsten puts it, "he still seemed to hold back from abandoning the very separation which he was investigating - that between culture and biology" (Carsten, 2000, p.8).

frustration with the fact that the new scholarship employs "no discernible theory of mind" (Shapiro, 2009, p.16). Shapiro believes that the "new kinship studies" fail to represent a serious challenge to the sort of universal procreative grid that Kroeber envisioned, but still worries that they may prove ruinous: "It is fine to point out, as Schneider's admirers do, that there are other means of establishing kinship links…but to deny that these means are secondary or derived…entails a remarkable misrepresentation of the ethnographic record and a violation of scholarly responsibility of a very high order" (Shapiro, 2009, p.15).

Weston herself is unapologetic for the thrust of her arguments, and for stimulating a renewed emphasis on kinship, but she acknowledges the pitfalls of trying to incorporate the very terminology used by the queer families in her influential study, *Families We Choose*. In particular, she concedes that there are drawbacks to leaving the concept of "choice" at the core of her theoretical apparatus: "the very language of chosen families employs a predictable, pervasive cultural rhetoric of voluntarism that draws on individualized notions of freedom and will" (Weston, 2005, p.132). Weston devotes an entire chapter of one book to interrogating the prevailing "rhetoric of choice" that effectively promotes a "…(mis)reading of choice as an unconstrained, individuated, color- and class-blind affair" (1998, p.85). This consumerist rendition of choice is perpetuated by both proponents and opponents of "chosen families" in a variety of contested readings, but choice becomes more narrowly reconstituted as it is "…refracted through

culturally standardized representations of what it means to be gay *and* to choose" (Weston, 1998, p.90). Weston struggles against this re-ordering of what choice means, and her work consistently emphasizes the confluence of political-economic events that have alternately served to open and closed doors on queer social movements, and on the legal recognition of same-sex relationships. She proposes that "kinship may be constructed, but that does not make it a blank slate on which actors - be they transgender, gay, bisexual, or straight - can write whatever they please. Queer sorts of families configure relationships, however creatively, from historically available materials." (Weston, 2005, p.132) [32]

Stanley's sentiments quoted above suggest a certain simplicity to the practice of "choosing" family. As he puts it, it's just "easier" to make your own family. Even if one acknowledges Weston's point that there are limits to the freedom to "choose family", it is tempting to happily follow the tenor of Stanley's comments. What could afford more freedom than the prospect of following one's own whims when it comes to becoming attached to others? However, as I continue to consider Stanley's circumstances as an old man, it becomes clear that the shaping of his relatedness and the development of his intimacies have been anything but "easy".

[32] While Weston acknowledges that the term "chosen family" is potentially fraught, it is important to note that she also still finds it to be preferable to labels such as "alternative" or "substitute" families.

New Avenues: Family Relations as an Older Man

When we talked about the fact that he had no biological children, Stanley expressed no regret. All three of the men that he was partnered with early in life ultimately followed a more conventional route of getting married and having kids while Stanley embarked on his own path. He suggested that he had grown weary of entering into intimate relationships where he ended up "living their [the other partner's] life", so he explained that "…after forty I decided to, not to team up anymore, just to raise 'em instead of marry 'em, as the expression goes." I pressed Stanley about the dissatisfaction with his long-term partnerships, and he explained that, for the most part, each had been a case of concealed intimacies. Whether hidden from a specific opposite-sex partner, or from the rest of a lover's life as a whole, Stanley had found himself waiting, as it were, "beyond view" in all of his serious relationships before he gave up on seeking fulfillment through coupled relationships.

Stanley told me in no uncertain terms that members of his blood family had given him the most trouble he'd had in his life, and that he had "resisted family for years". Most problems he had had on this front revolved around the open expression of his sexual preferences, and he believed that the "best thing for any gay person to do is to cut family loose…[since] they say that you're accepted, but you never are." Accordingly, Stanley had periods in his life where he tried to escape blood kin entirely. At one point, he had had his name removed from the

local phone directory, precisely because he had grown weary of receiving calls from family members.

Despite Stanley's apparent resoluteness on these matters, it was clear to me that, as an older man, he no longer heeded his own advice. After many years of successfully avoiding blood kin, Stanley had assumed the role of the physically distant, but emotionally present, uncle or grand-uncle within his blood family, whose members mainly live in the Southeastern part of the United States. Stanley had reached a point where it was nothing for him to rattle off the birthdays of his numerous grand-nieces and -nephews: a sure sign that he had re-connected with his biological family. Moreover, in the two-year period that I knew him, he frequently corresponded with extended family across the country, and occasionally travelled to visit them as well.

It was in the down time between visits and phone-calls on Sundays that Stanley liked to catch up on all his correspondence with family and friends. Often this could simply mean responding to letters he received during the week. However, Stanley also kept a schedule book to mark the birthdays of all of his family members and a few close friends, in order to prepare for upcoming celebrations. Stanley would make a special effort, only ever disrupted by health troubles, to send a card (with a letter enclosed) for all of these birthdays, along with a twenty-dollar bill included for all the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of his three siblings. Beyond the birthday routine, Stanley also tried to stay aware of

specific stages of life these children passed through; he sent money for graduations and he was also "getting in the habit" of sending small toys and other gifts such as picture frames to the parents of the youngest kids.

Three years prior to my having met him, Stanley also began taking on a larger annual project each March: he sent out a larger sum of either money, or equivalent savings bonds, to all of the grandchildren (as well as their children) on his sister's side. All told, Stanley would send funds to fourteen individuals. These monetary gifts helped to reduce the income tax he paid, but this was not the primary impetus for his having started to send out the funds. Stanley's younger sister died in 2000, and before she did, he made a promise to her that he would take measures to ensure the well being of her grandchildren. He kept this promise, and of his own initiative was planning to expand his circle of recipients to include the grandchildren of his half-brother William. Contradicting other statements he made about an indifference to divesting what he owned, he also already ensured that his accrued federal savings bonds would be sent out to the younger generations of his blood family. Stanley occasionally received thank-you letters from the younger kin who were beneficiaries of his generosity. However, he explained that this recognition was not the norm. For the most part, Stanley heard from one particular grandniece, Shauna, who could confirm that his gifts had been received, and share any other news about the family.

Seen merely as an individual's form of divesting personal wealth, there was nothing particularly unusual or striking about Stanley's familial gift-giving. It is well documented that *inter vivos* transfers are a popular method for transferring value to younger generations of kin in the United States (R. Miller & McNamee, 1998). What *was* somewhat surprising is that Stanley felt the inclination to continue to bond with family in the first place. Stanley explained that, during their lives as somewhat distant siblings, he had frequently come to his sister's financial rescue, since she had inherited their mother's ineptitude in matters of money management. Taking on a guardianship role with her progeny, then, can be seen as an extension of a responsibility that Stanley had long since assumed. Still, considering his eschewal of norms around the primacy of blood family, the fact that Stanley honoured a sense of family obligation struck me as curious.

In truth, Stanley's movement to embrace family did not constitute a wholesale shift in outlook. His re-connection with family was tempered by a healthy dose of ambivalence, and he expressed a need to be cautious about his interactions with his relatives. He had made recent visits to stay with a particular grand niece in Georgia, but was not going to attend a major upcoming reunion they had invited him to. He figured that he would end up being a nuisance to folks who would be busy seeing all other their relatives, and added, "you know how that is, you don't want to wear out your welcome." Summing up his feelings about this aspect of his life, it was almost as if he was a little surprised and perhaps bewildered at the

growing bond himself: “It’s not my own kind, but it’s family, you know…we [gay men and women] seem to be doing that more and more.”

Conclusion: Stanley’s Shadow Dependents in Late Life

Somewhere alongside Stanley’s ambivalence about playing “great uncle” to many of his siblings’ children, often largely out of view, lurked the nagging sense that growing older was not everything he wanted it to be. Stanley’s renewal of familial exchange was, in one sense, a happy reversal in personal outlook. Where he had once distanced himself from blood family, Stanley consistently showed that he cared about them in late life. Curiously, what constituted connection and renewal from one angle appeared far less resolute in light of his apprehension about his new role, as well as other facets of Stanley’s will to belong. In particular, material traces of past non-blood relations emerged to disrupt the benign simplicity of a narrative where a gay man reconciles differences with his biological family at the end of life.

It wasn’t until Stanley spoke about *waiting* for his “kids” (or, if they had died, at least for their relatives) to revisit the records of this previous life that I could see his predicament more clearly. I recognized that these assembled documents - the scrapbooks, photo albums, and various other logs - emitted as many vital signs about Stanley’s late-life performance as did any of the actions he took to bond with blood relatives. The documents and mementos Stanley kept were living residues of

care and exchange relations. He remained concerned for the meaning embedded in them, and though he knew it was unlikely to occur, Stanley waited for the moment they would again resonate.

Of course, viewing Stanley's later years from this vantage point makes things seem rather tragic. But this was not really very close to the overall impression I got from spending time with him. Was I simply duped into perceiving contentedness by his slow conversational style, and the calm way he had about him? Maybe to a certain extent I just did want to believe in his easy smile, and in the twinkle in his eyes. I've already noted, however, that I could sense a lingering disappointment amidst this affable manner; apparently this letdown became visible as Stanley's expectations for old age forged their heady merger with his tangible experience. Or perhaps his was rather a case of revised expectations, whereby he announced *post facto* that he'd always known of his kids' pending absence. This would be more consistent with relevant literature, that shows that Stanley would not have been alone in his disappointment with his "made" family; Weston, for one, finds that "chosen kin" were expected to be there for one another through ongoing, reciprocal exchanges of material and emotional support (Weston, 1995).

Again following Weston's lead, one could say that Stanley had been *forced* to choose to renew relations with his blood family because of the enormous pressures that helped to convince his kids to "move on" in their lives. Certainly part of this would have been due to economic pressure - a street hustling livelihood does not

lend itself to stability in adulthood, nor to particularly graceful aging. But it is also possible that conventional prescriptions around family life and a vigorous pathologization of homosexuality in the past century would have pushed Stanley's kids to go straight, and leave their "mother hen" behind. These remarks do not take anything away from the adjustment Stanley made to re-integrate blood family back into his life. He had engendered ties in an unexpected way, and his openness is rather admirable. Rather, they merely indicate the fact that socioeconomic realities made it difficult to make some of his "choices" stick, and to have his "made" family endure into his later years. But perhaps the dark cloud of this unfulfilled vision ultimately looked pale to Stanley, in comparison to what he *had* been able to overcome in his lifetime. He could recall, for instance, what would have been a remarkable strength he had mustered to decide to effectively come out of the closet in his early 40s, and to find himself a role as a nurturing mother, and secure some semblance of stability for the "second half" of his life.

Had Stanley's "kids" surprised him, and surrounded him with warmth and respect in old age, it is not too great a leap to envision a third, and final, stage of the temporal schema with which Stanley narrated his life. A reckless, carefree youth had been first, and a sober responsibility, however unorthodox, had followed; one can see how Stanley might well have ideally added a period of indulged comfort that afforded assessment at the end, where he might confirm or revisit the meaning of enduring relationships that were in plain view. Instead there

was a drop-off, of sorts, where cautious forays with blood family combined with residual objects from a past domestic scene to stand in for the animated intimacies that might have been.

This imaginary exercise is all very academic, of course, but perhaps it is also misleading. The tripartite schema may well underestimate the strength of Stanley's wholesale movement to self-reliance that came in mid-life. Or, better put, perhaps it underestimates the extent to which the ideology of independence he employs is intertwined with virtue in all stages of the life course in America. Richard Sennett argues that there are three direct paths to gaining respect in contemporary America, and that self-reliance is king among these. As a longstanding legacy of Lockean liberalism, the ability to forego routine assistance from others remains a prerequisite of sorts to full adult citizenship in America (Sennett, 2003). When Stanley told his own story, he rehearsed a multi-layered tale, but the values of responsibility and independence were clearly at its core. Stanley uses the marker of his return to San Francisco as the onset of a period of happy self-reliance, yet there are hints that the value became ingrained even further back in his youth. His own mother's carelessness with money helped to teach him financial responsibility at an early age, and Stanley had apparently always been charged with bailing out his sister in difficult moments. To best preserve his attachment to this core value, it is certainly possible that Stanley would have been unable or unwilling to accept care and assistance from his "kids" had they actually been around in his later years.

In their UK-based study of family life, Finch and Mason found that a majority of individuals were set on achieving something close to "balance" in their intra-familial exchanges (Finch & Mason, 1993, ch.2). Individual family members worked at this by keeping a close eye on each instance of giving and receiving, and making sure that the levels of each were fairly equivalent between themselves and their kin. While the process of achieving such balanced relations necessarily unfolds over time, it is unclear whether such an imperative would still hold if the unit of analysis was the adult life course as a whole. If a man like Stanley gives generously in his early and middle years of adulthood, is it more likely that he will be willing to embrace some level of dependency as he ages? Chapter 4 shows that, for some of the men in the current study, there is an impulse to "give back" - to family, to community - in order to even out an imbalance that tends to the opposite pole; in other words, they have the nagging feeling that they have received more than their share over the course of their life, and that they need to "even it out". These perceived imbalances are the reverse of what I am pointing to in Stanley's case, and the effective difference, of course, is that a "debtor" identity is almost always undesirable. A person in constant need of assistance bestows none of the respect or status conferred to those who are identified not only as "self-reliant", but "giving" as well, but rather generally provokes the unkindly judgment of others.

My sense is that Stanley's attachment to an ideology of self-reliance would have been difficult to shake, but it is impossible to know for sure. He continued to

give regularly as an old man, but perhaps he would gladly have accepted returns on the generosity of his younger self had they been offered. His older self's suggestion that the companionship of his "kids" was, in fact, all that he expected or needed from that set of relationships deserves consideration here as well. By making such a statement, it appears that Stanley has found a way of draining some of the excess credit accrued during his "Mother hen" period. If he got something back commensurate with what he was giving at the time, the absence of his "kids" in old age is technically not a major issue. Moreover, Stanley's use of kinship terminology to label his relations with the young men and women enacts a particular normative framework where, while there are strong imperatives to fulfill obligations, a calculus of reciprocation that is strictly balanced can be deemed an unsuitable form of analysis (Macintyre, 1999, p.100).

Perhaps we can see the contours of a properly tragic narrative more clearly not in what was, but in what might have been for Stanley. His efforts to enact and reenact familial belonging expose the fact that a credo of independence, whereby one is presumably free to "follow one's heart", is not always suited to help solve the riddles of relatedness. Stanley joked that a strong attachment to independence brought him suffering, and perhaps this was another instance where his laughter masked difficult truths. He was most vocal about the fact that it best for gay individuals to steer clear of blood family, but he also understood well that his freely "chosen" relationships afforded no more in the way of guarantees for achieving a

fulfilling life course. Due largely to prevailing mores in the historical era that framed his life course, the forms of intimacy Stanley had chosen were rather abruptly cut short of their full potential. His partners from his early adulthood could not find a workable way to embrace the relations they made with Stanley, and few of his kids could see the sense in maintaining kin relations with their mother hen. It is hard not to see a kind of irony at play here: Stanley really has invested so much energy in growing and cultivating his "made" family, but it appears as though he is getting a greater, unanticipated, return on a lesser investment in his blood family.

Chapter 3 - Walter: Fixing Family, Righting Wrongs

Introduction: Lineage as a Measure of Man

Many of the study's men wished that they had more opportunity to be in contact with members of younger generations.[33] However, this desire did not generally coincide with regrets about never having had children. There were very few men in the study who talked explicitly about having missed out on the chance to procreate, and to become a parent. Walter (b. 1934) was an exception to the rule. As we will see, however, his regret has little to do with the notion that he missed out on one of life's unique experiences; instead, Walter feels that he has shirked a primary responsibility to his family, and thereby spoiled a vital continuity across generations. This chapter considers the role that a particular idea of family plays in Walter's self-understanding as he ages, as well as the unlikely way that he speaks of redeeming himself in the eyes of kin. It also documents the sense of frustration and confusion that Walter feels as he tries to jettison elements of his past, only to have them continue to colour his day-to-day life as an older man.

The physical, in-person, contact associated with close relationships is important to Walter, as it is to every man whose story is told in these pages. However, Walter's notion of finding fulfillment through the domain of family is

[33] This desire will be investigated more fully in chapter 5.

rather abstractly conceived. Largely divorced from everyday, tangible connections, the *idea* of a real, enduring family takes on a salience to Walter that approaches, or perhaps even outstrips, the concrete support of someone "being there". I argue that for Walter, and for several men in the study, such abstractions hold considerable weight during the aging process because they clear paths to unimpeded "rebecoming" (Schechner, 1985, ch.2). Schechner's notion of this "restored", or "twice-behaved" behavior helps to delineate the free play of theatrical performance, where behavior is always somewhat separate from those who behave it. He proposes that such a phenomenon is also relevant to everyday life, however, where it offers to both individuals and groups the chance to "rebecome what they once were - or even, and most often, to rebecome what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become" (Schechner, 1985, p.38) In Walter's case, a romantic appeal to the realm of "what if?" briefly helps to side-step entrenched plot lines of self-understanding, opening up space for potential shifts in his social identity.

Homing In: Walter's Path to San Francisco

I was first introduced to 70 year-old Walter by another research participant, William, at a gathering for a special "President's Day" church holiday meal for seniors. When we first met, Walter seemed diminutive in stature, though he was probably of average height, balding, and with glasses. He initially seemed uninterested in making my acquaintance, and I assumed that he was not going to

want to interview for the research. However, I ran into him by chance as I was about to leave the gathering, and he asked me directly whether I wanted him to do an interview. Walter's manner of speech was such that, even if he'd begun a sentence at a high or neutral pitch, by the end of it the tone had dropped considerably. The effect was that he often sounded distinctly unenthusiastic about whatever utterance he'd made. Faced with the puzzling disjuncture between his apparent interest in the research, and a tone that made it sound as though actually participating was the last thing he wanted to do, I still managed to formulate the right response: I gladly took his number to arrange an interview. I would get to know him through a series of interviews at his apartment, as well as at subsequent church-sponsored meals.

Walter's family was from Ohio, but he and his parents moved a number of times when he was young due to his father's job as a church minister. Walter finished high school in New Jersey, and subsequently bounced around within and between college programs and drama schools on the East Coast in his late teens and through his twenties. Eventually, he dropped out of post-secondary studies altogether. Not long after Walter graduated from Princeton high school, his father was killed in an automobile accident in another small New Jersey town, Belvidere. As Walter left for what ended up a brief stay at Rutgers University in 1952, his only immediate family member remaining, his mother, stayed on in rural New Jersey.

Walter moved west in 1961 with a touring theatre company that put on performances in churches, but he only stayed with them for a few months once he arrived in Los Angeles. After this, Walter had little luck finding roles in plays in Southern California, and a friend's decision to start a new theatre group in San Francisco convinced him to head to the north of the state in 1965. Recalling the variety of experiences in theatre he'd had in early- and middle-adulthood, Walter could not muster up much excitement. In fact, just as he described his decision to seek opportunity in San Francisco, his voice trailed off to the following, uninspired, utterance: "Whatever," he said, adding only that "Theatre never became a career." Walter did, however, work as an actor until he was in his 50s, when a nagging bout of "stage fright" caused him to give up the vocation. Walter was used to picking up whatever work was available to make ends meet while he was still acting, though he frequently had to fight the perception that all actors are transient. After being let go from a position as a stockroom attendant, he was told "You're an actor, and we know you won't stay anyway." Walter had no inspired plan to pursue after he was through with acting, but ended up working for a short time as a janitor in a local San Francisco church.

Since 1968, Walter has lived in the same subsidized one-bedroom apartment in a high-rise on the edge of San Francisco's downtown Tenderloin neighbourhood. The block he lives on is by no means upscale, but its pharmacies and restaurants distinguish it from the urban zone only a couple of streets away that is populated

by more liquor stores and check-cashing outlets. Walter lives on his own now, but at different times in his tenure he has shared the living space. First, just after he first arrived, and after his mother retired from a teaching career in Ohio, Walter's mother would come to stay with him for periods of six months at a time. By 1983, she came to San Francisco for good, and until just prior to her death in 1993, Walter was her primary caregiver as they lived together in the apartment. Walter's mother suffered from a variety of ailments - the symptom Walter alluded to most frequently were her bouts with fainting spells - and spent a good deal of time bedridden. While Walter had to provide her with assistance on a daily basis, he pointed out that the fact that she was confined to her bed actually had a positive side to it: it helped to alleviate a space shortage in his small apartment.

Later, in early 1995, Walter developed an intimate relationship with a woman, Eleanor, whom he had met at a church function. Not long after they started seeing one another, she moved in with him. This co-habitation lasted not quite three years and, after what Walter described as "constant arguing" in the latter stages of their relationship, Eleanor moved out in February of 1998. One of the difficulties that Walter and Eleanor had when they lived together had to do with conflicting ideas about occupying and sharing their physical living space. Walter has a tendency to collect a variety of objects during his daily routine - some things bought, and others found or given to him - and he brings much of this back to his apartment. Some of the materials he collects with a specific purpose in mind. For instance, he saves

newspapers that he purchases, and arranges them in tall stacks along one of the walls in his living room. He explained to me that he likes to keep these so that he can go back to earlier issues, mainly to check on the veracity of his political contentions. Other objects, like stray tennis balls his finds around town, he has no specific plan for. He cleans up these balls after he finds them, and once suggested to me that they perhaps could be used in an actual tennis match; however, he never intends to put them to that use himself. He conceded that they would likely just accumulate indefinitely in the large box he kept them in.

Eleanor had a hard time living with Walter's collections, and she insisted that he store a lot of his stuff after she moved in. Walter found himself having to visit his storage site frequently, however, and this became a great nuisance during the time they were together. Now that he is alone again, Walter has small mountains of boxes in various clusters around his apartment. The stacks of newspapers made the greatest impression on me when I first visited, since they line and climb the wall in the main sitting room. However, boxes stacked haphazardly in a small room off the kitchen were more of an obstruction, as they rendered the room virtually uninhabitable. This made a significant difference in his small apartment, since the space might have been used as a dining room had the boxes not been there. A good deal of what Walter stores is material that could (and will, according to Walter) be recycled for a small monetary redemption. He pointed out that the difficulty is that he does not drive, so that it is fairly onerous for him to take bags of

plastic bottles back to the supermarket for the five-cent return. However, because they do have value, he cannot bring himself to simply deposit them in the recycling bin in the basement of his apartment building.

Amidst the more mundane items he houses, Walter does also have a cherished set of journaling books that contain his mother's diary. He has perused this document on occasion, and maintained that he will read it all some day. Walter believes that it is inevitable that the entire lot of material items in his apartment will end up in the trash, since it is really of no use to anyone else. This realization is irksome to him, but not primarily because of the emotional attachment he has to some objects. Instead, Walter feels aggravated that it will all become landfill, since he often collected objects to prevent this very fate. For instance, Walter has been saving the styrofoam cups from his meals at senior centers for some time now, partly because he abhors the idea that they will end up being dumped, *en masse*, in the garbage. He concedes, however, that he himself has never had a plan for preventing it.

Walter appears to be resigned to accepting an undesirable fate for many of the material things he has accumulated. Even if he found an appealing way to dispose of the papers, bottles, and cups, Walter does not have anyone in his life to serve as a fitting recipient for his more personal possessions. As such, everything is lumped together as his "stuff", and pre-assigned to a disposal that is ultimately devoid of much meaning. Nevertheless, the ungainly circumscription of Walter's material

things does not mean that he is also resigned to an overall "lot" as he ages. Instead, as the following section demonstrates, Walter still has some ideas about how he might change his perceived position as a member of his blood family.

An Unlikely Quest

Part of the way through our first formal interview, after discussing ambivalent experiences with a particular church group he attended, Walter announced to me that he would "like to live long enough to see his own grandchildren." The sentiment would amount to mere cliché, except for the fact that, like the other men in the study, Walter still did not have any children of his own, let alone children who were ready to have kids themselves. In order to get a sense of the logic behind Walter's somewhat unusual desire, it helps to hear how our conversation proceeded that day:

> D: I'd like to talk some more about your work experiences, and also what's important to you today…
>
> W: Well, I would like to live long enough to see my grandchildren and I don't have any children yet.
>
> D: Yeah, that's a hard one.
>
> W: And now, women, if they're interested in me, they're past menopause.
>
> D: Right.
>
> W: Yeah. Well, I mean some people believe the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. That's the theological way of thinking.

D: Sure.
W: The biological way of thinking is that the chief end of man is to reproduce himself.

D: Right.

W: I've been alive, really, since the primordial ooze.

D: Okay.

W: But I'm going to die, once I'm dead, if I don't have any offspring. My parents will die, because of that. My grandparents won't. My grandparents had other children, besides my parents, and so they'll live on, in my cousins. On the family tree, I'm like a twig. My grandparents on my father's side are dead, because my father's sister died childless. My mother is the only one of her female siblings. None of my mother's sisters had any children. But, uh, my mother's brothers did.

D: Okay. Do you figure that is that the main way to pass on…? I mean, are there other ways?

W: Well, like I said that the biological chief end of man is to reproduce himself. The theological chief end of man is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever. And I guess existentialism is when there is no chief end except for what you make for yourself; for an actor, it's to win an Academy Award. It's whatever you make of it - your own chief end. But I think, really, the biological chief end is the real one.

D: Really? That's the main one for you?

W: That's the main one for everybody, I think, physically speaking. You could have a psychological one, I suppose.

D: Did you ever think about adopting, or anything like that?

W: Well, no. I would want a mother, even if I did adopt. Or a wife, I mean to say. I mean, not that I believe in marriage. If I adopted a baby, I would want a mother for the baby. Even if I adopted, and I had a mother, then I could have my own.

D: Oh, I see. So it's important that it be from you, literally.

W: Yeah.

Walter's reasoning here is fairly abstract, but the logic of his expressed wish is clear enough. His desire is to keep himself and members of his family "alive" by preserving continuity over the long term, and he believes that biological reproduction is the only true path to accomplishing this. Within the big picture of family and humanity that Walter sketches, his life is barely visible - he is a mere "twig" - and this is unsettling to him. I could understand why Walter was bothered, but I must concede that I was somewhat uncertain about just how seriously I should take Walter's pronouncements about a desire to have progeny. I was initially caught off guard when Walter asked me point blank whether "I knew of anyone" that might help to resolve his problem. I shook off this request, though, and he neither seemed surprised, nor did he ever press the issue again.

Walter's social network was rather limited: he mentioned only two individuals when I asked him whom he saw "on a regular basis". Given these circumstances, the idea that he would meet someone, especially someone younger, seemed rather far-fetched. I had noticed a "world's greatest grandfather" statuette displayed in his apartment during this same visit, and the fact that it was on display got me wondering anew about his preoccupation. I asked him about the figurine, and while he seemed pleased that I had remarked on it, he drew no connection with his quest to procreate. He explained that an acquaintance had given it to him, but it

did not sound as though the individual knew anything about Walter's concerns about extending his lineage. I expect that Walter knew full well just how unlikely a prospect having children was, but that expressing the possibility kept conceptual doors open for him. Ultimately, whether it was realistic or not, the narrative was doing something for him: it was enacting possible fulfillment where, to the moment, there had mainly been disappointment.

Rather than a missed life experience, Walter clearly believes that his childlessness constitutes a failure to fulfill a responsibility to his family. His is a curious sense of shame, however, as it is unlikely that other family had thought much of it, let alone confronted him with it. Walter's parents are dead, and he never had any siblings, but he does have extended kin in various parts of the United States. However, Walter did not make much mention of his living relatives in our conversations. When asked specifically about family connections, he indicated that he corresponds with his extended family in Ohio, Florida, and Minnesota, but only really with annual reciprocated Christmas cards.

D: I can't remember…what family do you keep in touch with?

W: I got family back in Ohio. On Christmas, she sends a card to me.

D: Who's that?

W: I call her my aunt-in-law - my uncle's widow, and she's got a daughter, my cousin, who… I've got a cousin in Minnesota too, who sends me a whole box of summer sausage every year.

D: Wow! Do you correspond with her…?

W: We…every year she sends a present and a Christmas card, and I send her a Christmas card back thanking her. And so it's just those two.

D: So you keep in touch with family a little bit, then…at least somewhat?

W: Well, I'm the oldest member of my family now, blood family, except for one guy, on my mother's side, who lives down in Sarasota, Florida.

D: He's older than you?

W: He's 90!

D: How do you know? I mean, are you sure he's still alive?

W: He sends me a Christmas card every year. And he missed last year, so I sent him a letter, since I was wondering where he was. And he sent me a letter back. So he's still there.

Walter neither spoke of visiting family, nor of relatives coming to see him in San Francisco. It stood to reason that he had not laid eyes on kin in many years, possibly since his mother passed away in 1993. The infrequency of this contact did not appear to concern Walter, and his periodic holiday correspondence seemed to suffice as a way to maintain ties. To say that Walter was indifferent about family would, however, be overstating the matter. In fact, both Walter's concern about extending the lineage, and his recognition of his position in the family chronology (i.e., virtually "the oldest"), show that Walter cares about his family's story, and his own place in that tale.

At first, Walter's sense of duty to a lineage appears to stand in contrast to his blasé attitude toward getting to know his contemporary blood kin. However, this lack of concern with proximity and connection is somewhat less contradictory than it appears. Walter is interested in playing a family role, but there is a diffuse, long-term horizon for his concern. Indeed, the scale that frames his musings is evolutionary, featuring reproductive success and primordial ooze. It is as though the extinction he worries about only exists in an abstract sense, at some distance from the actual members of his family. It is true that he mentions his parents and grandparents specifically, but none of these people are around to experience disappointment with Walter. And yet, he clearly feels disappointment in the name of family.

In their compelling book that documents the lives of older, frail Americans living alone, Rubinstein and his colleagues identify a shift in scale that provides a new horizon for the choices that isolated, homebound elderly make (1992, p.145). The authors suggest that in the process they call "miniaturization", individuals refocus on abridged versions of a meaningful life-world, so that they are able to live up to the norms of independence and "freedom of choice" that have been operative throughout their lives as adults. These changes can emerge in a temporal sense, becoming manifest, for instance, in claims to total control over daily scheduling. But the spatial shifts are even more pronounced, as the men and women in their study delimit personal boundaries within the strict confines of

small, domestic spaces replete with meaning. Correspondingly, the authors identify an "*ethos in the freedom of the small",* and propose that many of their participants derive a reconfigured autonomy from "small-scale decision-making in the home" (Rubinstein, et al., 1992, p.145). Walter, too, works to wrest a renewed order for his life, and as is the case for these frail seniors, independence and personal responsibility continue to serve as guiding forces for this quest. However, his outlook does not appear to jibe with this emphasis on *miniaturization*. While Walter's tendency to hang onto material items in his apartment may reflect a ready means of controlling a small segment of the world, the horizon for his general late life concerns also greatly exceed the collecting that he does. In fact, Walter's focus on his ultimate familial status appears to run directly counter to Rubinstein's generalization that "for older people, the big picture has often been painted in"(1992, p.145). For Walter, it is precisely the big picture that weighs on him, and his quest for fulfillment rests uneasily on the hope that it will somehow change. It is, of course, somewhat unfair to compare Walter's outlook to that of a homebound senior. Perhaps Walter would cease to talk about grandchildren and lineage should he, too, lose the mobility he now enjoys. I expect, however, that a semblance of this rather unlikely script would remain, precisely because there are no so-called "reality checks" impinging on it. Rather than resting content with downsized expectations, Walter invokes an abstract sense of family that opens him up to a

wholesale review of his present existential status, and is very much tied to possibilities of how he might be remembered as part of a kin group in the future.

Quotidian Life: Routine Frustration

At this time of his life, Walter spends the middle of the day most weekdays at facilities that provide lunches and activities for senior citizens. In fact, on the day I would regularly see him, he would commonly travel back and forth between two nearby churches, to insure that he received food in each location. He explained that, since he did not know much about cooking food, these meals were especially welcome occasions for him. But because he felt lumped in as an "old fogey", Walter was less than enthusiastic about the social aspects of the seniors' gatherings.

> Q: You do go out to a lot of senior centers.
>
> A: Yeah, and I don't even really like senior centers.
>
> Q: Oh, don't you?
>
> A: No, well they categorize seniors. I mean John Glenn, you know, went up on the space shuttle just to prove that you can be 77 years old, and still do things other than go to the senior center. And Dianne Feinstein, she's a couple of years older than me, and…I don't like to be categorized like that. I'd like to live in a commune, where everybody is on the same level.

That Walter is nonplussed with senior centers does not mean that he avoids engaging with others in his daily visits. He was involved in an American History discussion group prior to the lunches at the center where we met, and had for years been active in the Bible group as well. Both of these arenas of study were well

suited for Walter, whose considerable knowledge of history and society was a source of my own admiration for him. In our one-on-one conversations, Walter waxed eloquent on many topics with resonance in American culture, from the Kilroy graffiti that originated in mid-20th century wartime, to unorthodox interpretations of biblical stories reproduced in popular television programs. Walter is interested in sharing his erudition with others, but in practice, this sort of communication has always been rather rough going for him. On several occasions, I saw him visibly irritated after getting into arguments in discussion groups at the church, and in interviews he recounted a number of memorable clashes with fellow seniors that arose by virtue of his interpretations of religious and historical matters. In fact, Walter was summarily kicked out of a Bible group because of what was deemed a lewd interpretation of the Genesis story. In short, the wide-ranging intellectual value Walter possesses seems to end up translating as a source of strife rather than a means to connect.

As if these social difficulties were not enough for Walter, he often becomes aggravated with another facet of the communication process. In the course of recounting personal stories, Walter placed a strong emphasis on relaying precise numerical details. For instance, he wanted me to know the exact day that he first came to live in his current building: it was December 18, 1968. Unfortunately, Walter was also prone to trip over such dates, and would spend a great deal of time and energy trying to perfect his ability to recall them exactly. His memory was

hardly faulty, even when compared to someone half his age. When he was unsure about a date, he came much closer to precision than one might expect, but it was difficult to convince him that an approximate figure would sometimes do. Again, Walter became somewhat agitated about these imperfections, and it was apparent that this attention to detail was only liable to exacerbate his day-to-day social interactions.

For all of the difficulties Walter had participating in groups, and sharing his knowledge in public settings, his primary source of frustration is more closely related to the troughs of personal routine. In particular, Walter feels as though he has spent much of his life consumed with the basic needs and desires of others. As he put it, he often found himself "living the lives of others". This phrase is central to Walter's self-understanding, and it means exactly what it suggests: that he has spent a good portion of his life performing tasks that he would rather not have, and serving others interests instead of his own. The prime example of this was the caregiving he has performed over the years. Like many who undertake such work, Walter had never taken on this position in any official sense. But this lack of a formal designation does not diminish the bearing the role has had on his life. By the time I met him, Walter had been providing near-daily assistance to someone, either in his home or in a nearby apartment, for close to twenty years.

First, Walter took care of his mother as she was aging, and eventually, as she was dying. She moved to San Francisco to live with Walter for good in 1983, and

required considerable assistance with daily functioning as well as symptoms from a variety of ailments in her last years of life. As she approached her death in 1993, Walter's mother did spend five months in a nursing home after a brief hospitalization after worrisome fainting spells. However, Walter explained that his mother was very much opposed to the idea of living her final years in a nursing home, and he did not want her there either. Already possessed of a strong sense of filial duty, Walter also considered his obligation to care for his ailing parent as a means to right past wrongs. Specifically, Walter believed that since he had for the most part failed to take care of himself financially, he had to make up for this dependency by taking care of his mother in old age. His mother had continued to provide him with money well into his adult life, and since she chose to take only small fractions of her full due while alive, he still receives money from her pension today. Walter calls himself a "remittance man", a label that conjures images of money transfers from migrants to relatives in a home country. In his case, it denotes a slightly different form of dependency, where the recipient remains at home, still counting on the recirculation of family funds.[34] Here, a distinctly negative meaning is attached to the process, confirmed by Walter's other self-identifying label: he considers himself a "failure in life".

[34] This usage is actually somewhat closer to the original meaning of the term. A "remittance man" in the age of British Empire denoted a man who lived abroad, supported by family handouts from home.

Though his mother had been gone for fifteen years, Walter still found himself in two separate situations where he served as a caregiver during my fieldwork. The first of these instances was rather less intense than caring for his mother, and it was assistance that Walter chose to provide of his own accord. He was busy helping a woman in her seventies named Jill whom he called his "girlfriend". After a brief hospitalization for respiratory problems, she had been moved into a nursing home in Oakland. Jill had the medical attention she needed, but often asked Walter to come to bring her provisions, both from retail stores and from her home. Though he did want to help her out, Walter began to feel overwhelmed by the half-day journeys to the East Bay.

D: You say that you've been over to see Jill a few times recently…
W: I go every Friday.

D: How is that? I think you said that the home is okay. Not too depressing…?

W: No. But I'd rather here [at home]. I take BART [the subway] from Powell St. Station… well, first I walk to Powell St. Station [roughly 10 city blocks]. I take BART to Lake Merritt, then I walk 20 blocks…

D: 20 blocks!?

W: Then I walk back 20 blocks [and resume the public transport trip back to his apartment in the city].

D: And you said that you often bring her things?
W: Yeah, she wanted some candy for Mother's day, so I brought some for her… it was all Russell Stone's. A pound of Bonbons, a pound of Creams, and a pound of Caramels.

Walter's trips to see Jill begin to scratch the surface of somewhat contradictory moments of self-understanding: Walter was interested in seeing Jill, and in helping out where he could, but he also found himself a bit dumbfounded that he would agree to make the sacrifices that the relationship required. He was fond of Jill, but it was not as though he was committed to developing a long-term relationship with her. Under such circumstances, he seemed to end up behaving in ways that ran counter to his own will. Walter was much less equivocal about another relationship he was embroiled in, one that played out much closer to home.

A neighbour, Jim, who lives in an apartment a few doors down on the same floor of Walter's residential building, suffers from an unspecified, but debilitating autoimmune disease. Jim receives in-home care for assistance with the administration of his medications and general functioning. Walter points out, however, that since the official care workers do not live with Jim, there are inevitably times when he needs help when they are not around. Walter gets frequent phone calls from Jim, since his neighbour often has trouble with the mechanics of the IV drip that administers his nutritional supplements. Walter explained that Jim makes quite a mess with the fluid that he unhooks when he answers the phone, and that Walter usually goes to help clean up. Since Jim is on morphine for his ailments, he is also prone to forgetting his conversations with Walter, which only means additional phone calls.

Walter essentially ended up inheriting the role of de facto caregiver for Jim from his mother, though the transfer of responsibility occurred even before she died. Jim had known Walter's mother well, and, as a loyal friend, she had helped him for a significant period of time, according to Walter. Her assistance to Jim predated his sickness; as Walter put it, at the time Jim was "just a helpless drunk". She eventually grew tired of regularly helping Jim get back on his feet, but she saw that Walter replaced her in the on-again, off-again care-giving role.

Walter's sense of desperation over his situation with Jim became apparent on my very first visit to his apartment. During our interview, Jim called on the telephone, to see if Walter was going to come by to help him out. As it turns out, Walter had been by not long before I had arrived, but Jim couldn't remember this. Walter was understandably exasperated about the interruption, and he passed me the phone, insisting that I listen in to Jim's ramblings at the other end of the line. We did subsequently have a chance to resume our own conversation, and Walter seemed to be able to put Jim out of his mind. However, as I left Walter's apartment, and was walking down the hall to elevator, he rushed out asking if I would mind coming with him to see Jim. I agreed to do so.

The first thing that was clear upon entering Jim's apartment was that it was much bigger than Walter's and, since it was on the corner of the building, had much better natural light coming in the windows. This difference was, of course, not lost on Walter, who complained that the space was essentially wasted with Jim

as the resident, as he "never does anything but to go to the bathroom". Jim was sitting in a large armchair, hooked up to an IV, and though he spoke to us, it was difficult for me to understand what he was saying. I felt rather awkward entering with Walter, as it was evidently unclear to Jim who I was; though Walter announced my name to Jim, he did not explain why I was joining them in his apartment. As mentioned above, Walter had called on him earlier, and it didn't seem that there was much to be done to assist Jim. In fact, Walter mainly just repeated with some agitation what he'd already said to Jim on the phone: that Jim had forgotten that he'd been by earlier, and that there had been no reason to call again. After a brief stay, we bid Jim farewell, and I believe that he actually thanked me for coming by.

I left somewhat unsure of why Walter had felt compelled to have me accompany him to see Jim. I understood that, in part, he wanted me to see for myself what it was that was weighing so heavily on him. However, it also occurred to me that he might have hoped I could help in some way. I asked him again about Jim's in-home support, and Walter explained that he periodically expressed his frustration over his de facto care-giving role to the paid aides who came to check in on Jim. However, since there was a great deal of turnover of staff, Walter said that his complaints never seemed to register.

Walter understood very well how he had first assumed the role of Jim's de facto caregiver. His mother tasked him with the work, and Walter had always felt

as though he was in her debt. The fact that the situation had continued long after his mother died was what bothered and puzzled Walter: it felt like he was stuck with the role, and he explicitly stated that he could not quite figure out why. At one point, Walter told Jim that it was not his responsibility to provide him with personal care, and Jim had the nerve to spit his generosity back at him. Walter explained: "That's what makes me so mad at him. I told him that I was tired of taking care of him, and he said to me: 'Well, you took care of your mother, didn't you?'"

What was behind Walter's sacrifices of time and emotional energy? A clear dynamic had been established between Walter and his mother, whereby Walter was routinely on the receiving end of the gift-exchange relation, and this effectively conferred a permanent debtor status on him. Unbalanced exchange relations between parents and children are not all that unusual, though, which leaves the question of how and why Walter had absorbed a negative, guilt-ridden, interpretation of this identity. It is difficult to determine the extent to which the mother-son dynamic lay at the root of Walter's self-assessment. Walter insisted that his mother thought of him as a "failure", though it is not even clear if she used the word herself. What can be said is that, regardless of precisely how Walter's identity developed, ingrained discourses of independence in the United States make coming to terms with adult dependency highly challenging even where familial

support is present.[35] As Sennett explains (2003, 63-64), self-reliance is one of the primary paths to gaining respect for the American individual, and Walter cannot rid himself of the sense that he forfeited the opportunity to build a worthy reputation because of his longtime dependence on his mother.

I believe Walter's claim to puzzlement over why he continued to help out with Jim's care to be genuine; however, I also see it as a way of expressing another, uneasy, sentiment: that he feels trapped in the role. That he would utter this at all suggests that he is, at the very least, confounded by the staying power of an identity forged at an earlier point in his life. A narrative of failure pervades his being, ingrained by a longstanding inability to live up to an ideal of the self-made man. Thus, it appears perplexing (if perhaps only momentarily) when he tries to assess his circumstances as the products of choices made from a neutral, rational standpoint: i.e., why would one keep on helping when obligation ceases? But since the "remittance man" is more than just a label, but rather a (re)enacted deficit bound to his identity, his behaviour reflects a need to "make up" for it. However, despite this difficult acknowledgment, it remains premature to speak of resignation. One can see that Walter wants to peck away at this spoiled identity[36], even if he cannot reverse it completely. Though it would be somewhat ironic, the minor

[35] See Thomas Debaggio's account of his journey into Alzheimer's disease as an illustration of the painfully strong ties between personhood and independence in the U.S. (Leibing, 2006).

assistance he provides to Jill and to Jim may represent attempts to wrest control of the exchange process. Perhaps he will come to a point where he will see that he is helping out on his own terms. In the meantime, in more searching moments, he narrates the implausible scenario whereby he finds a way to "count" by providing continuity to his entire family lineage by having a child.

Intimate and Unknown?

We have seen that Walter is dissatisfied with his contribution to his blood family. This discontent is central to understanding his general approach to figuring relatedness, but he is also troubled by another narrative of family: the story of his brief coupling with Eleanor. As mentioned above, the two went their separate ways in 1998 after just three years living together. By 2001, Eleanor had developed cancer of the stomach, and, despite their separation, Walter provided assistance to her as she was in and out of the hospital during the last 2 years of her life. Eleanor passed away in 2003, but it is neither her rather abrupt passing, nor the dissolution of their partnership that preoccupies Walter today. It is the fact that, as he looks back at the time they spent together, he feels he does not even understand who his partner was. Despite their co-habitation, and the care they demonstrated for each

[36] Goffman's concept is borrowed here, where a discrepancy between an individual's virtual identity (or expected attributes) and actual identity leads to the spoilage, effectively "…cutting him off from society and from himself so that he stands a discredited person facing an unaccepting world" (Goffman, 1986 (1963), p.19).

other, Walter remains uncertain about how much of herself Eleanor ever shared with him.

When they first began spending time together, Eleanor was fairly secretive about her past, and Walter learned to refrain from asking about it. Remarkably, her furtive nature extended to their day-to-day lives when they were living together, and Walter remains at a loss about penetrating the barriers she maintained. Eleanor had many sets of friends, but they were all kept fairly separate; at the outset, Walter was only invited to gatherings with certain groups of them. Eventually, however, Walter was more thoroughly integrated into Eleanor's social life. Here he describes what it was like to provide her company at a "couples club", a social function designed to be a cross-gender mixer for people in committed relationships:

> D: You said that Jill used to be a little a particular with her different circles of friends…?
>
> W: Well, there were *her* friends, and there were *my* friends, and at first she didn't want me to meet any of her friends, and she didn't want to meet any of my friends. But then when we lived together, she decided that we would have *our* friends.
>
> D: Ah.
>
> W: So there was yours, mine, and ours, you see. So she started taking me around to these places, they're like couples clubs.
>
> D: Okay.
>
> W: And every once in a while, there would be a time where I could say something.

D: Like what?

W: I mean, she would be talking, and telling a story, the same story that she told somewhere else, but she would tell it a little differently this time around.

D: For a different audience…right.

W: Well, but I'd say 'Hey, that's not the way you told it at so-and-so's'. And she'd get angry with me for saying that.

D: She didn't want you interfering in her socializing…

W: She said it all so that I never knew what was the truth. She'd tell one person one thing, and another person another thing.

Walter was admonished for betraying Eleanor's trust by pointing out apparent contradictions in her narration of events, but with the "truth" so elusive, it is unclear that there was really much trust to betray. Eleanor's tendencies as a "joiner" were also problematic for Walter. As with the "couples clubs", Eleanor convinced Walter to get involved in a variety of social groups that he would have not otherwise participated in. In retrospect, Walter did not particularly regret this, since it had introduced him to different people and organizations. However, as it was established above, Walter often found it difficult to find a comfort zone in any sort of group settings. He was most frustrated however by the fact that, in many instances, just as Eleanor would have piqued his interest in a group, she would abandon the gatherings herself.

D: Here [on a pamphlet] they talk about a picnic. Is that the kind of stuff you'd do with them?

W: Yeah.

D: And was that enjoyable?

W: Yeah.

D: But that was through Eleanor?

W: Yeah. She'd join the group, and get me involved, and then she'd quit. She'd sign us up for a course that might be sixteen weeks, and then she'd maybe go twice!

D: Well, that's kind of perverse.

W: She was kind of puzzling.

Walter now frequently wonders about Eleanor. Rather than reflecting on why it was that they did not stay together, he is much more interested in determining just who it was that he had lived with. Eleanor was the first and only woman with whom Walter had an enduring, intimate relationship; as he liked to say, "She was my first girlfriend". However, given the unusual gaps and inconsistencies in her stories, and her reluctance to resolve them, it is not even clear to Walter that what they had can be properly called intimacy. Nevertheless, Walter is determined to continue looking back to reconsider the meaning of their relationship. In so doing, it appears that he wants to do more than just remember her; in a sense, he wants to re-enact her, to better draw out the meaning of their relationship. He recounts her

stories, with all of their contradictions, but he also occasionally plays at bringing her to life again. At one holiday lunch gathering at the church where we met, Walter was conspicuously active. He moved from one table to another with pen and paper in his hand, apparently asking others to write something down. Though I did not immediately find out his objective, and was not asked to participate, he later told me that he was getting the others to sign a card for Eleanor. It was her birthday.

Conclusion: Redemption over Resignation?

Psychologist Dan McAdams spends most of his book, *The Redemptive Self*, focusing on the positive qualities of what he sees as a quintessentially American mode of storytelling about the self: the personal narrative of redemption. The author draws from interviews with individuals in mid- to late-adulthood to trace the contours of this narrative's central plotline: "…a gifted hero encounters suffering of others as a child, develops strong moral convictions as an adolescent, and moves steadily upward and onward in the adult years, confident that negative experiences will ultimately be redeemed."(McAdams, 2006, p. 241) McAdams expresses admiration for the individuals in his study who embody this narrative, showing that adherence to *overcoming* as an organizing life principle also frequently means a commitment to the growth of future generations; citing Erikson's work, he labels them "generative superstars", always seeking to pass on to others life in their own image (2006, p.5).

Walter is no "generative superstar". McAdams points out that one need not reach this pinnacle to see life in redemptive terms, but the truth is that Walter's tale would probably fit best in McAdams' eighth chapter, entitled *Contaminated Plots, Vicious Circles*. Here, the author briefly considers cases where the tale of redemption appears to be flipped on its head, as life tends to sour rather than sweeten with the passage of time. Upbeat beginnings for individuals featured here tend to reverse course, often due to some form of early psychological injury. The author adds that, for those following such a life's trajectory, the "past leaves a heavy burden" that is difficult to escape. By the latter stages of life, McAdams shows that such men and women often lack a generative impulse, and exhibit rather more concern for ridding themselves of certain aspects of their troubled personal histories in order to "save face". According to McAdams, "while highly generative adults focus attention on children and the future, adults low in generativity think mainly of their own problems and concerns. In a sense, they are then their own children" (2006, p.221).

Logically speaking, a man in Walter's position might well become his own child, as he literally has none. More than this, though, there is much in the script outlined by McAdams that coincides with Walter's story. His father's death at an early age certainly qualifies as an early trauma, and, as an old man, Walter constantly contends with the recurrence of disappointments and failures borne in the past. Most pointedly, Walter's onerous experience with caregiving repeats itself,

and his frustrations with the ongoing relationships do seem to leave him mired in a world of his own. Even in the intellectual domain, where he has clear gifts to impart to others (and to other generations), his talents and knowledge prove non-transferable because of a vexed communication pattern.

Still, while it is true that Walter feels trapped within his own story, I believe that McAdams' own narrative misses an important aspect of a performance such as Walter's. It forecloses too soon, I think, on the continued presence of big-picture, other-directed thinking for someone in Walter's shoes. Walter is full of regret, and he has effectively given up on the possibility of change in certain core aspects of his life. However, this does not preclude him from continuing to consider himself and other members of his family in an aspirational framework as he grows older. Walter may express resignation about his accumulated wares, and his day-to-day life, but he is not willing to close off on his reputation, or on the ultimate standing of his parents and grandparents.

Perhaps McAdams is right that someone like Walter is not liable to put "trust in redemption", but there does seem to be a glimmer of hope in his talk of extending the family line. Of course, locating hope in a image that is highly unlikely to ever be anything more than fanciful is telling in itself. Yet it is not therefore to be left out of the equation. In fact, it is precisely by recognizing Walter's quixotic nature that his performance of an aging self may be best understood. I expressed above that, as a researcher faced with his outlandish talk of

becoming a father, I was left somewhat puzzled. More importantly, it prevented me from ever confronting him with the very fact that his quest was so unbelievable. My hesitance leaves important questions unanswered, of course, and it was probably due, in part, to my unwillingness to share uncomfortable moments with Walter. However, perhaps this is also the point. Walter meets only stubborn resistance when he tries to change his undesirable care-giving situations, so that he feels unable to shed his "remittance man" identity. Yet his incredulous vision of fathering a child is effectively disarming, so that there is no push back, or confrontation. In this way, if only for moments, he is able to transcend his entrenched failings, and evoke the possibility of change.

Chapter 4 - William: Philanthropy in a Minor Key

Opening: At Home

On a late summer Tuesday, William (b. 1936) and I had arranged over the telephone for me to pick him up at his budget hotel on the edge of San Francisco's Tenderloin district the next day, so that we could go out for a late morning coffee. However, when I arrived to get him on Wednesday, William greeted me at the entrance to his room still wearing what appeared to be underclothes. It was clear that he was not yet prepared to go out in public, and that it would make more sense to stay in to have our conversation. After he cordially invited me into the room, he proceeded to climb into his bed, and to pull his covers up over himself.

Although we had only met in person a couple of times before, William was clearly comfortable enough to carry on with his morning without much regard for my intrusion into his home. Fairly bright and attractive from the outside on the street, the luster of William's hotel quickly became muted upon entering the interior. Up the stairs from the lobby, the carpets and walls were shabbier, and the lights dimmer, and it was easy to get lost in the maze of rooms that is fairly typical of a small San Francisco hotel. William's room is in it's own little nook directly adjacent to a room occupied by another long-term resident. Once inside, the room itself was dark because the windows are covered with dark plastic sheeting that

may have been garbage bags in lieu of drapery, apparently taped up to deliberately block out sunlight. The physical space was quite small, perhaps 100 square feet without the small, attached bathroom. The room bore some resemblance to a college dorm room, with loose paper and books strewn around, and clothes left here and there. It also had a lot of pictures, postcards, and phone numbers displayed haphazardly on the door to the bathroom, and elsewhere on the walls of the room. However, unlike a dorm room, typically occupied for just a couple of semesters by any one individual, William had made the place a permanent home.

After having lived in the same cramped quarters for more than three decades, William still felt relief to find himself where he was. His living situation provided him with a sense of peace and stability. William had experienced a tumultuous youth, perhaps illustrated best by the fact that his parents had seen fit to have him transferred between nine different schools between his seventh and eighteenth birthdays. He explicitly contrasted the stress he had felt in this early period of his life with the predictability of his life as an older man: "thirty-three consecutive years here… that's a steady home, and it makes things easier for me, to keep control of things..." William's expense at the hotel he called home included room-and-board; he paid just over $600 a month, with breakfast and dinner included six days a week. This package deal affords him an invaluable convenience; to him, it was particularly important to have a meal service because he suffers from diabetes, which had made it increasingly difficult to stay mobile

enough to feed himself on his own. William's hotel is located just a block or two to the north of one the city's least desirable residential neighbourhoods, known as the Tenderloin.[37] However, just a thin line of physical separation appeared to make all the difference for William, as he referred to areas deeper within the urban blight as the "dirty end of town".

Family Relations: Present Past and Absent Present

William explained to me that once, after describing an account of familial strife to a psychotherapist he was seeing, the therapist characterized the tale as "another episode in your sad and tragic family relations". This characterization upset William, but only because he too found it to be a fair reading. His family had moved from Hawaii to San Francisco when he was a boy of about 6 years old, and that he and his two brothers had spent significant periods of time with relatives in Seattle, as his parents worked through difficulties getting settled in California. The primary difficulty for William in his youth was not, however, this occasional migration between cities. Rather, it was the fact that, once settled in San Francisco, he was bounced around from one school to another within the county. William's mother was a teacher in San Francisco County's public high school system, and his circuitous journey was precipitated by the fact that, in his own estimation, his

[37] This hotel's proximity to relatively run down urban spaces is not exclusive to accommodations that double as long-term residences in San Francisco. In fact, much of the city's high-end hotels are located adjacent to the Tenderloin as well. See (Groth, 1994) for a history of various styles of urban residential hotels in America, and San Francisco in particular.

mother was unsatisfied with the way many of the schools treated her son. As an older man, William believed that his mother had been unreasonably quick to blame school administrators for his problems in school, which were both academic and social. He felt that his mother had often created problems where there really were none, and had so engendered the furious movement from one place to the next that continued for years on end. William's mother's "difficult personality" was, for reasons even he does not comprehend, especially so in the family's early years in San Francisco; in his view, the whole family suffered greatly for her "behaviour [that] bordered on the lunatic". William's father, who was active in the Baptist ministry and had started a church and school in the city of South San Francisco in 1946, himself felt compelled to keep his own wife away from his workplace because of her tendency to become embroiled in controversy.

It took William many years to weather the worst turbulence of his stormy youth, perhaps even until he settled in his current domicile by his mid-thirties. A few years prior to this, he had managed to find work as a clerk with the United States Postal Service. While this steady employment would end up complementing his stable residence nicely, William pointed out that because there was "lots of night work", the employment was hardly conducive to a settled and fulfilling life outside the job. Nevertheless, William carved out a career as a postal clerk, and has drawn a pension as his main source of income since he retired in 1992.

William's parents were perhaps all too present in his life as a boy, but he now feels that there is a significant void in his life since they both passed away in the 1980s. He has never has much success in his relationships with women, and has never built a partnership that has lasted long-term. He did date a woman he met at work over a period of a few months, and even briefly got to know her son from a previous marriage. However, the romance did not last long, and William characterized the relationship as a "mistake". William expressed no regret about never having started his own family, but he was disappointed in the way he had lost touch with his existing blood family. He had two brothers, but the eldest, John, also died in 1993, and he and his youngest brother, Tommy, were not on speaking terms when I met William. William was clearly bothered by the estrangement from his surviving brother, as it essentially meant that he was cut off from all remaining extended family. Most troubling for William was the fact that he has virtually no contact with nieces and nephews who live in near Sacramento, California, not one hundred miles from San Francisco. His brother, Tommy, expressly forbade these kids (now adults) from keeping in touch with William. While William and his brother have had antagonistic relations for some time, he showed little interest in unearthing the roots of their conflict. William did, however, mention that there had been some difficulties after Tommy asked him to share the expense of their brother's funeral; William balked at the request due to his own financial troubles. In the hope that things were bound to change as his niece and nephew grew older,

William continued to telephone them on occasion up until recently, but has now grown weary of being hung up upon.

William's Urge to Help

Given his family's intent to maintain a distance from William, normative expectations of reciprocity driven by kin obligation have been all but removed from his life. William does make an effort to cultivate a social life beyond the family, but this sort of interaction is not always easy for him. He regularly frequents three senior centers, two of which are to the north of his home on the edge of downtown, while the other is farther west in the Castro district. These centers provide lunch at nominal cost to seniors, and William arrives in time to take part in the meals, and is also well known to many of the staff and clientele. He is a tall man, but his imposing physical presence is tempered by a cautious, gentle nature. Given the chance to stand out amidst the varieties of routine small talk pervading daily socializing at the centers, William usually defers to others. When asked how he is, he responds with what amounts to his signature refrain: "oh, chugging along, chugging along…thank you". William's hesitating comportment, and his tendency to mumble to himself, at first appeared to denote a steadfast eschewal of social interaction; however, I learned in time that he engages friends and acquaintances when a topic of conversation really piques his interest. Still, even after I had known him for over a year, it was often quite a surprise to me when William contributed to discussions of various topics in a most articulate manner.

There is some truth to my initial perception that William was a rather timid individual. There were days at the centers where he would barely acknowledge others unless someone spoke to him directly. However, the impression that he was disengaged was contradicted by more than just the moments of vibrant participation in conversation. For me, the view of William as particularly solitary was first called into question by his insistence that he could help me to find participants for the study. As it turned out, he demonstrated an uncommon determination to serve as a primary go-between for my project, unlike that shown by anyone else I came across in the course of research. He zealously took it upon himself to connect me with individuals whom he thought might be right for the study.

I was thankful for William's willingness to become a de facto recruiter, but I felt it was necessary to rein in his efforts, after a time, since he was neither totally clear about the type of participant I sought, nor always particularly tactful in the way he approached candidates. Getting involved in the research project beyond his own contribution may have given William a sense of "social participation" he desired. Still, the sheer fact that he was able to act as a fairly successful social conduit remains peculiar even now after I had known him for an extended period. After all, this was a man who often had difficulty in recollecting for me even one deliberate personal encounter with a friend that he had had during the course of a given week.

William's willingness to play social mediator helped me to recognize that his urge to help was far from anomalous in the context of his broader day-to-day life. I encountered another instance of William's desire to assist others when speaking to him by phone one day. He told me about a disabled, homeless individual that he knew, informing me that he had taken it upon himself to help the man "get cleaned up". He was having trouble carrying out his wish, however, since the man seemed to be unable (or unwilling) to leave the particular area of the city where he kept his possessions. William asked if I might provide my vehicle to transport his acquaintance to the hotel where William lived, so that the man could use the shower off the bedroom. I hesitated a little at first when he proposed this – it was not a particularly convenient time for me to drive downtown – and suggested instead that I would call the social coordinator at the church to see if they could help him out. It turned out that William had done this already, however, and he was somehow unsatisfied with the response he had received from staff there. As was often the case where matters became awkward, William promptly ended the conversation with a swift "That'll be fine - very good then".[38] I found that William generally worked pretty hard to smooth over awkward conversations, often employing comments such as this one that had the effect of tying things together. When I tried to tell him that I wouldn't be making it to our initial interview because I had hurt my back, he responded quickly before I could go into any detail that

[38] See (Goffman, 1967) on the avoidance processs as a kind of "face-work".

"this is a personal matter", effectively pre-empting any explanation I myself had to offer.

Giving Without Receiving

William's altruistic tendencies were also demonstrated in his urge to share material items. He would always arrive at seniors' lunches housed at a church site with a bag or two filled with papers and magazines that he receives by subscription at his home. Most often, these included current editions of the New York Times and the New Yorker. It was no small feat for William to bring these publications with him across town; while he occasionally takes a taxi to the gatherings, more often than not he walks close to fifteen city blocks. This may not necessarily seem to be a great distance, but William's aging body places severe limitations on his capacity to traverse urban space. I would sometimes watch him approach the senior center from the street entrance, and it would commonly take him five minutes to make it 60 or 70 meters down the block.

I found that, as William's special guest, I could be reasonably assured that the reading material he carried was earmarked for me. I was, however, certainly not the only recipient of William's goodwill; I witnessed two other patrons receive these gifts, and neither seemed overly surprised at the gesture. William would normally dismiss any weak protest I made about accepting his generosity, usually resolving the matter with a curt "…but they're yours now".

As it happened, at one point during my research period I acquired a subscription to one of the publications that William would kindly offer to me at lunches. As my fieldnotes from the subsequent day suggest, this complicated things some at the point of exchange:

> William was sitting at the front table when I arrived, and he hastily ushered me into my seat at his table. He proceeded to fetch a bag of his things, and handed me the New Yorker and NyTimes that he had earmarked for me. Since I now have a subscription to the New Yorker, I asked him if it would be okay to pass the issue on again to Walter. William appeared a bit flummoxed by the idea, but then did agree that it would be okay. Walter, of course, decided that he had little use for it, and that "someone else should have it." (It was the food issue, and he explained that "I love food, but I don't know how to cook it.") I eventually was successful in reversing the vector of exchange: I conferred once again with William first, and passed the mag to Robert – who fully appreciated it!

The "tipping point" for upsetting a balance of sorts for these minor transactions came later, though, at a lunch gathering that I attended after friends had come from Southern California to visit my wife, Nicole, and myself. These friends brought a remarkable bounty of freshly picked oranges and avocados from San Diego, and I decided that I would bring some to share with William. I offered them to him after he had again given me the regular print media as a gift, and I even explained that I could try to arrange to help him transport them to his apartment. Though he did not refuse them outright, it was clear that William was a little uncomfortable being on the receiving end of the equation. Almost right away

(after giving me a nice smile), he asked if I would mind if he would "give them to the homeless". I said that they were intended for him, but that he could do what he wanted with them. Minutes later, I could see that he had taken them up to a staff member who helps out and works the door at the center, to see if he would take any of them.

This was not the only time that William showed a marked reluctance to be on the receiving end of a gift, however minor the gesture may have been. He had shown an interest in Atlantic-Canadian regional music in our one-on-one discussions, so I suggested to him that I bring him a copied recording of an artist that he had enjoyed in the past. To my surprise, he became mildly agitated at the prospect of this transaction, explaining that he really preferred to steer clear of anything that was not paid for.

Sharing Taste, Showing Grace

William has a clear passion for film, and for theatrical performance more generally, and once prompted, he is eager to share his well-honed opinions on the world of art and entertainment. Moreover, when he can find the right venue, William likes to show videos and recorded operas to groups of other seniors at the centers. Either he borrows these recordings from libraries, picks them up from downtown dealers in used videos, or even occasionally orders them from Europe. Each time that he would call to invite me to a holiday lunch at a church in a neighbourhood adjacent to the Tenderloin district, William would be sure to also

request my presence at his movie showing that followed the lunch. During my research, I was in attendance at two of his screenings at the center: Truffault's *Day for Night*, and *On the Waterfront* by Kazan. William would sometimes inquire about titles of potential interest to me, or inform me about the options that he expected to have available for a coming gathering. As I came to know William better, it became clear to me that organizing these events was important to him, as they help to disrupt the predictable flow of mundane life.

The home-cooked meals offered on holidays at this particular church are usually delicious, especially compared to the standard fare available at most senior centers. However, for William, the movie showing after the meal is the real going concern. Not only does he spend some time thinking about the videos that he wants to show, and in procuring them, but it is also important to William that he attracts an audience to see the shows that he selects. In this particular venue, he is generally given the opportunity to announce the day's movie as lunch is being served, and he rather cordially invites all to attend. However, because there are various activities occurring at the center, William often has trouble attracting people to his showings. Another man, Walter, complained to me that William was overzealous in the way that he encouraged Walter to attend the showings, even though the latter had made it clear that a particular movie was of little interest to him.

Once I understood the significance of the viewings for William, I made sure to give him a clear indication as to whether I would be able to attend. It was not uncommon for William to call me two months prior to a particular holiday lunch to invite me to join him, partly in order to confirm that I would also attend the movie showing. To be sure, I disappointed him more than once, but the real disappointment for William was when the program director at the church would feel the need to cancel the movie showing outright. I witnessed this unfortunate happening more than once, and twice it occurred at the very last minute during the communal lunch. The reason for the cancellation could be simple restrictions on space available, but once it occurred because the security staff was distinctly uninterested in hanging around after others had left. According to William, the man working the door of the center wanted to "shut things down" because he only received his hourly wage up until a certain point in the day. William was always visibly upset about losing his screening venue, which was understandable given the fact that he had planned the viewing weeks, or even months, beforehand.

I spoke with one of the center directors about William's expectations, and though she may not have fully understood the intensity of his hope to carry off the movie showing, she did subsequently make an effort to communicate with him about logistics for making it happen. In my experience, there were two different occasions where William sought out alternatives when his plans were thwarted: both times, he asked of the small group that we follow on to his home to watch the

movie on his own television. This never actually came to pass, however, as his place was a good twenty minutes away by foot, and not an especially logical space even for the small group of us to reconvene. In fact, given that his home is effectively no more than a cramped hotel room, it is a testament to his determination to follow through with the viewing that he invited anyone there to share in the appreciation of these recordings.

William was regularly engaged in another form of "sharing" films where, again, he seemed to derive a good deal of gratification from the process. As mentioned above, in addition to borrowing and renting videos, William sometimes purchased movies outright. He sometimes used these for his organized screenings, but he also made more permanent contributions to a specific library he himself frequents. William pays a $75 fee annually for membership at the Mechanics' Institute Library, located in San Francisco's financial district. He explained to me that he does so partly so that he does not have to rely on the main public library near city hall, which is a neighbourhood he avoids. The Mechanics Institute Library is housed in a landmark building, designed in 1907 by one of San Francisco's classic architects, Albert Pissis. In addition to its considerable collections, the library has an active program of literary and cultural events, and serves as a meeting site of the oldest chess club in the United States. While William mainly borrows books and recordings from this exclusive institution, he informed me that he also donates videos of his own, after having acquired them at from one of a

number of local retail outlets. Though he makes no claim to having added to the library's collection to any notable extent, a routine William carries out demonstrates that he does, in fact, care about the contribution he has made: he periodically checks the library computers to see the frequency with which his donated videos are checked out by other patrons. He did not elaborate much on why he makes this effort to monitor "his" videos, saying only when prompted that "yes, it's very nice [to see the videos out to users]".

Giving to Earn Respect as a Senior Citizen

In his recent work that addresses the puzzles and perils of living in an unequal world, sociologist Richard Sennett points to three ways people routinely earn respect in contemporary America: (1) self development, or making the most of one's abilities; (2) self-care, or maintaining self-sufficiency in one's personal affairs; and, (3) giving back to others (2003, p.63-64). He proposes that bringing talent to fruition is regarded as important, since we condemn waste at a societal level. Self-sufficiency is perceived as a critical quality, Sennett says, as it helps individuals to avoid becoming a burden to others who have their own personal struggles to endure. "Giving back" to others is historically tied to the Christian notion of charity, or *Caritas*, and Sennett argues that it remains intricately tied to personal virtue even in a contemporary context, where secular institutions play a primary role in regulating behaviour.

Each of these proposed pathways to respect retain salience for the elderly men in this study. William's story itself serves to introduce aspects of all three themes, but is featured here in order to focus on the third route to an esteemed senescence: the will, or perhaps the imperative, to give. Sennett proposes that it this aspect of character that is "…the most universal, timeless, and deepest source of esteem…" since, unlike the other two paths, it requires the participation of others, as principles of exchange are at its core (2003, p.64).

One might expect that for an old man with limited personal means, and waning family support, demonstrating self-sufficiency would serve as the default measure for gaining the esteem of others. However, I hope that it is clear by now that William has a strong urge to do much more than simply maintain his own personal autonomy. In the analysis that follows, I contend that William's focus is rather on having cultivated a certain sensibility, a taste of which he is proud to be able to offer to others. I also argue that William's "service" to others has less to do with making connections, or building relationships as he ages, and can be more accurately understood as an exercise in the kind of self development of which Sennett speaks. Finally, I consider the fault lines of the broader discourse about "volunteerism" in old age, indicating where William's story may reveal blind spots in understandings of late-life fulfillment.

Giving as a One-Way Street

William's willingness to go out of his way to assist me with my research project did not make for an especially unusual fieldwork experience. Like most scholars engaged in the ethnographic enterprise, I was highly dependent on a few select individuals to make it possible to carry out my study. However, as I have already indicated above, his interest and ability to help in the specific way that he did – helping me to recruit additional participants – does, in fact, seem remarkable. Indeed, in so many ways, William fits the profile of the isolated senior citizen. He has very little family, no friends to speak of, and he lives alone without connection to social groups where formal membership is required. Given this rather bare personal environment, the list of multiple names William provided me with seemed tantamount to a conjuring trick. In fact, he had stopped acquaintances on the street, popped in to see shopkeepers he knew, and got the word out at the two centers he frequented.

Seen from another perspective, William's alone-ness, and this foray into the wider community are not contradictions. In fact, they make perfect sense together. The logic runs as follows: precisely because William lives a relatively solitary life, he seeks out opportunities, however minor, to engage with others. Making small gifts, and "serving" others by accomplishing mundane tasks, provides a modest entrée for the "loner" to participate in civic life, and to forge bonds with other individuals.

Though he never expressed it in this plain way to me (who would?), there is little doubt that William engaged others in the way that he did partly in order to escape a fairly solitary fate as an old man. Although he insisted to me that his secluded living arrangement was a relief to him, it does not follow that it provided him with a contentedness in the broader picture of his life. While he is reassured by the fact that he is able to maintain control though his stable residence, his actions also suggest a kind of restlessness regarding his place in the world. He has no children, nor aged parents, and so there is no built-in expectation for him to be "of assistance" to others. Senior centers, with their loose community structure, provide a relatively easy site from which to make connections. There are many familiar faces at the center, even if there is no guarantee (nor requirement) that any one will be seen on a particular day.

There is, however, a detail from William's story that diminishes an interpretation where "connecting" with others is the focal point. This is the fact that while William seeks to provide help, and to give gifts, he is resistant to attempts to complete circles of reciprocity. In other words, he eschews the recipient role in the gift relationship.[39] This reluctance does not mean that William absolutely refuses to assume this role; he did briefly solicit my help in the case of the homeless man he himself was trying to assist. Even in this case, though, William was only showing neediness on the part of another. We see his more common mode of avoiding

assistance in my unsuccessful attempts to extend offers of small items to him in return for his generosity. In the case of the copied audiotapes that I offered to make for him, he suggested that he was concerned about the legality of the transfer. Perhaps William was especially cautious in this case due to a bad experience in the past. However, if he had truly been worried about legal transgressions, you would think that William would have also stayed well away from putting rental movies on public display without formal permission.

Further evidence that William resists reciprocation of his benevolence appears in the context of his movie showings at the senior centers. While the periodic events are clearly very important to him, it turns out that William rarely sits with others for any extended period during the viewings. After he makes a short introduction to the film, and starts the projector, William often leaves the room for extended periods while others watch. Of course, the point is for the audience to engage with the movie itself, but his extended absences still struck me as curious. Another older man who was occasionally in attendance expressed his frustration to me about William's departures: "Why does he leave the room?" he asked. "He wants us to sit and watch all the way through, doesn't he?" Again, it appears that while William is eager to announce his personal tastes to others, and to encourage their own aesthetic appreciation, he is rarely interested in moving much beyond

[39]See (Adloff, 2006) for a summary of theoretical treatments of reciprocity and gift-giving.

these modes of sharing. As such, he steers clear of forms of engagement that require him to truly integrate the value-attachments of others.

William's resistance to reciprocation appears to have an ironic effect: he participates in interpersonal exchanges, but due to the unidirectionality of these value transfers, they fail to nurture the growth of relationship bonds. William reaches out to others, but he does so in a manner that will not easily serve a friendship, or any other sort of intimacy for that matter.[40] This is why it is misleading, I think, to see William's other-directed behaviour as a way to make connections with particular individuals, or as satisfying an emotional need to bond.

Giving as Work on the Self (Image)

There are individuals who, for reasons often embedded in their psychosocial backgrounds, are generally limited in their capacity to enter into, and maintain, meaningful relationships. Perhaps due to his traumatic youth, this is true in William's case. Still, the evidence that William makes few lasting connections with others only begs the question of what his performance does accomplish. Clearly, William knows that his actions are "ineffective" in growing a circle of intimates, yet

[40] In this sense, William's form of gift-giving approximates the dynamic of the "modern" anonymous gifts routinely made by the wealthy donor classes. Tittmus, in his early work on blood donation, proposes that this modern form of giving is nonreciprocal, effectively disrupting the threefold sequence of Maussian exchange where there is gift, acceptance, and return (Titmuss, 1970). Silber shows, however, that it may be a mistake to conceive of such anonymous giving as predominantly impersonal, as it mainly occurs "…within very localised, communal frameworks where donors and recipients know each other quite well, or can easily, if they want to, get to know each other and meet face to face." In other words, communication of the spirit of the gift

he regularly repeats them. Is his "work" effective in other ways? If it is not a matter of forming bonds, or maintaining connections with others, then why does he bother? Why lug heavy bags full of newspapers across town? Or painstakingly arrange to show videos where the venue is clearly not always conducive to doing so?

Sennett argues that, in its inception, the idea of *Caritas* was more about building one's own virtue; as it was originally practiced, it did not so much matter what one's charitable work did for others, or if it truly benefited recipients in some way (2003, p.138). Instead, the point of reference for judging the "success" of such work was the development of the person who practiced it. Sennett points to Hannah Arendt's contention here that, in Christian practice, the fundamental tenet of loving thy neighbour is, in actuality, no more than an opportunity to seek God's love by treating other humans as "mere occasions" for knowing this higher love (Sennett, 2003, p.139). Can we read William's acts of kindness along these lines? William mainly spoke of his religiosity in the context of his personal upbringing, where his father had encouraged him to stay in God's "good graces". I got the sense his altruism in late life was an extension of this quest, but he did not share anything explicit with me about his religious convictions. Whether by his deeds he sought out God's love, or instead perhaps Society's approbation, his actions

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(and thereby, the person) remains very much relevant to contemporary philanthropy, whether or not it is made on an anonymous basis (Silber, 1998, p.142).

seemed geared, at their core, to accomplishing work on the aging self. Proposing such a reading may sound rather damning, at first, as though I am encouraging people to "see through" William's other-directed acts, to recognize his true, selfish, motivations. Mauss' work shows us that it is more fruitful to keep both interest and disinterest in play as we interpret giving practices, however, as it is unnecessarily reductive to stick with one pole or the other (Adloff, 2006, p.409).

It is unclear whether William had a conscious purpose in mind at all with his gifts. His answers were characteristically curt when I asked about any one routine: as it was with the donations to the library, William offered only a few scant words about his gifts of periodicals, suggesting only that he gave them away as he was "done with them". A pattern that does emerge from these daily practices, however, comes from signals emitted by the material itself. Specifically, the value that William transmits or displays serves to index an aesthetic appreciation characteristic of a high status individual. In Bourdieu's terms, it demonstrates that William is linked to objectified forms of *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1986). This can first be seen with the publications William delivers, *The New Yorker* magazine and the *New York Times* newspaper. In urban San Francisco, neither of these is rare, of course, nor are they particularly expensive. However, they are conspicuous in their cosmopolitan character, demarcating difference from both local "rags", and from other popularly consumed magazines. They suggest a certain intellect, as well as worldliness on the part of the reader.

William announces his refined taste, too, by the movies that he shows. Or rather the films that he screens, for it is precisely this nominal difference that matters when one considers the specifics of his concern. Though they are hardly obscure art-house films, William's choices for viewing again introduce a fairly highbrow aesthetic. As noted above, I saw two of William's screenings during fieldwork: (1) Truffault's *Day for Night*, a French film full of allusions about the filmmaking process itself, and (2) *On the Waterfront*, by Elia Kazan. The latter was a major motion picture that won Hollywood's highest approbation. However, especially in retrospect, it is also considered to be a cultural document: by 1989, this film had been deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" by the Library of Congress and selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry. When I was unable to attend, William showed *Citizen Kane*, a well-known, landmark film, but again one that appeals to those with some knowledge of filmmaking. Finally, William also showed segments of a presentation of Wagner's epic opera "The Ring Cycle". All of these selections suggest an appreciation for fine arts, especially when one has chosen to screen them in public. And though William's inclination to leave his own screenings did not exactly demonstrate great interest on his part, he was always sure to confirm his knowledge a short curatorial introduction prior to the film itself.

Beyond the intellectual valence of the material he purveys (cultural capital in its objectified form), William maintains linkages with institutionally embedded

practices that also confer high status. For one, he is a member of the exclusive Mechanics' Institute Library, which is part of San Francisco's rich cultural heritage. Not only that, but his donations of video recordings mean that he is also a benefactor to this institution. Even in terms of spatial divisions of the city, the association with this library in the heady financial district runs in direct opposition to the disorder around main public library, where visible homelessness is among the most conspicuous in the city. The latter is located in the part of town that William avoids at all costs, despite the fact that it is quite a bit closer to his apartment. Consistent with his minor philanthropy at his library, William also informed me that he had purchased a life insurance policy where the *United Negro College Fund* was the sole benefactor. He liked the idea that he could contribute to the cause of "helping black folks get through college", and this was the only measure of monetary planning he had undertaken for the eventuality of his death.

Finally, there is William's exceptional help with my research project. He was not explicitly interested in the topic of my research, but he was interested in assisting with the "higher education" enterprise. He reaped no tangible rewards from this association, of course, but it served as yet another marker of a personal connection to an institution - here, a university - that was able to confer cultural capital. William's taste for, and affiliation with, "high culture" is somewhat ineffectual; his social awkwardness and reticence around exchange relationships make for few opportunities to spend the capital at his disposal. However, in his

limited capacity to transmit his tastes to others, William appears to have found access to a modicum of the respect that Sennett alludes to, even if, in his case, it tends to translate as self-respect.

The Late-Life Provider: "Helping Out" and the Aging Self

Anthropologist Joel Savishinsky argues that one major archetype of old age in contemporary America is that of "volunteerism". The author makes a comparison between this ideal, where fulfillment gradually becomes located in other-directed acts, and the *Sannyasin* (ascetic) role that pertains for many older men in India (Savishinsky, 2004). For older Hindu men, in particular, virtue in later life is conventionally reaped by following an inward path, where one withdraws and renounces worldly pursuits. The author allows that narratives of "proper" aging are variously taken up in specific individuals' lives, and that archetypes are primarily points of reference, but he insists that there are common interpretive threads specific to each country. Set alongside one another, the author suggests that the nation-based ideals offer a stark contrast in culturally constructed expectations around aging.

Savishinsky's employment of a cross-national comparison rings somewhat hollow, and is potentially quite misleading. In his zeal to elegantly illuminate difference – "…Indians are driven by a voyage of spirit, and Americans by a spirit of voyage" - the author risks masking some of the nuance he points to on either

side of the equation (Savishinsky, 2004, p.33). Most crucially, his dualistic contrast of self- and other-directed behaviour ideals diminishes the sense we get that there are elements of each form in both places. The author recognizes this overlap, yet clearly feels as though it needs to be downplayed: "While some older Americans are also prompted to serve by an inner desire to atone for failings or smooth paths to heaven, people's public reasons for volunteering are commonly stated in the language of social exchange...impelled not only by a "busy ethic" of keeping active, but by a moral imperative to "give back" to the community some of what he or she had benefited from in the past" (Savishinsky, 2004, p.33).

Despite its Manichean flavour, Savishinsky's work helps to elucidate one of the prominent themes that recurred in my conversations with the study's men: the expression of a strong urge to help others. The specific kind of assistance that any one man could expect to offer was, of course, always unique to his situation – some of the men were hard pressed to get by themselves on the meager resources they had access to. Vesperi's work shows that while American cultural ideologies dictate a flow of value from older to younger adults, many older adults find themselves hemmed into lives where the "shadowy" role of supplicant is the role most readily available to them (Lamb, 2000, p. 53).

Notwithstanding the poverty in material wealth faced by many seniors, there is evidence to suggest that passing on fungible assets is not necessarily the most desirable or meaningful form of transmission in later life. According to a recent

anthropological study in the UK, older men and women demonstrate a keen interest in the fate of personal keepsakes that have little or no monetary value (Finch & Mason, 2000, p.155). In my own research, varieties of altruistic sentiment emerged in the speech and action of men positioned at many points along the socioeconomic spectrum, and could be largely unrelated to material transfers. Despite this, very few of the study's participants cast themselves as serious social or political activists in late life. As Sanjek indicates in his recent book on politicized seniors in the U.S., involvement in such activism is liable to be a product of demographic confluences. He shows that very few individuals who, like a majority of my participants, had political outlooks shaped in the later 1940s or 1950s, got involved in political action in late life (Sanjek, 2009, p. 232).[41]

Instead, the men I spoke with strived to be "helpers" of some kind; in other words, they demonstrated an overriding interest in assuming the *social role* that corresponded with altruistic sentiments. As in William's case, this could be rather casually wrought through routine gift-giving, or it could involve more formal recognition as a volunteer or even a philanthropist. The desirability of taking on this role as "helper" was commonly touched on in individual interviews, and several of the men couched the impulse in terms of "giving back" to society. The

[41] While it may only serve to reiterate demographic realities, it is also worth noting Sanjek's finding that a majority of Gray Panther network conveners and members have been women (2009, p. 234).

proclivity to assist others unfolded most visibly, however, in one of the fieldwork group settings.

A peculiar dynamic around the notion of "service" emerged at bi-monthly LGBT gatherings I attended. At each meeting, a variety of minor tasks needed to be taken care of: usually this meant moving chairs, pouring coffee, fetching the lunches, serving the lunches, and, finally, clearing up. Curiously, the designation of volunteers was subtly, but consistently, contested, as was the separation of volunteers from those who were "receiving" service. To my knowledge, the tension over roles was never really named in public, but it occasionally surfaced nonetheless. As people would check in before the meal, some individuals who had coordinated with the group leader to act as volunteers would mention this status, especially if there were new folks in the room whom they didn't know. Some of these official helpers were not old enough to be seniors; however, some were. My own role was somewhat ambiguous. I never formally asked (or had been asked) to volunteer, but since I was clearly much younger - and so a non-participant of sorts - it was assumed that I would help out. As it turned out, it was a rare occasion when I didn't participate in a majority of the "service".

There were a number of older men who clearly desired to participate in serving, but had never been designated as volunteers. In fact, since I knew that one man in particular would be disappointed if he was not the "go-to guy", I sometimes deferred to his interest in fulfilling this role. There were several other regular

attendees who demonstrated this same interest and aptitude in performing the role of the volunteer. To complicate matters, there was also a bureaucratic element to the identification of roles. Beneficiaries of the services were all meant to sign in on a list attached to a clipboard when they arrived. However, as it turned out, everyone (including me) was encouraged to sign in, whether they were volunteers, beneficiaries, or joining in some other role. The rationale behind having everyone sign in was to ensure that it would indicate that there was a clear and consistent need to maintain the resources being allocated for this regular event. If numbers dwindled, it could be used as an excuse to cut funding for the program, and most seemed well aware of this. Also, there were often folks who showed up late to the lunches, so if everyone who was on time had signed up (even if they were not going to eat a lunch), the chances were better that there would be more than enough to go around. Again, I was not privy to any direct discussion about how tasks ought to be divided up, so I can only speculate about people's particular motivations to "help out". What is notable I think, is that, on the whole, performing the role of provider was clearly a desirable identity for many men.

Volunteerism and the "Win-Win" Narrative

> Know a joke, have a smile to share, got some wisdom to put to good use or a helping hand to lend? These and many more are the assets you bring with you when you offer your assistance and support to area organizations, neighbours and individuals needing help. Opportunities abound to tap all kinds of talents and levels of availability and to work with individuals or organizations, or to help with one-time events. You

> may discover in the process that your view of the world is brighter, your life richer, your health more robust, and your ties to the community deeper – recent post to AARP website

This quotation represents prevailing wisdom about the potential impacts of volunteer work for older Americans. For the AARP, and the vast majority of agencies serving seniors, volunteer work is an unmitigated good for older people. Not only that, but it is good for society too, since the civic engagement of seniors can be a tremendous resource in times of cash-strapped governing bodies. It would seem that the findings presented in this chapter are a good fit for this discourse, if they do not exactly buttress the collective evidence to any great extent. William and the men vying for "giver" status at the LGBT meetings are clearly good candidates for the AARP appeal. However, before this incorporation into this larger body of research and practice, it is worth recognizing a how William's case is possibly as much a mismatch as it is a match for the dominant view.

A convenient way to assess the situation is to consider the two sorts of "winning" alluded to above. On the one hand, society is said to win by having seniors "get involved". Communities get the civic engagement that many find to be lacking today (Putnam, 1995), as the combined talents and assets of older men and women amount to a large pool of social capital that can be harnessed.[42] Social services agencies and NGOs "on the ground" have an eye for implementing these

[42] The San Francisco-based non-profit organization *Civic Ventures* is a good example of an outfit that employs such a framework - see civicventures.org.

possibilities, but they are not the only one's proposing such a boon for society. Social gerontologists Gergen and Gergen (2000, p.300) resolve that the "aging population stands as a major resource for refurbishing the civil society", refiguring culturally entrenched notions of "productivity" and "social contribution" along the way. The authors point to the many important positions that today's seniors already assume routinely – from informal parenting assistance to serving on hospital auxiliaries – and propose that seniors' substantial "reservoir of personally determined time" is the key to further contributions to a renewal of social values in America. They propose that, in a "New Aging" era, there is much greater possibility for personal fulfillment for seniors, and a strong sense of volunteerism is integral to the developments these authors project. They outline a number of societal changes that help to account for why this is now possible, with prominent social, technological, and political dimensions at the core of the argument. The end result, according to Gergen and Gergen (2000), is that senior citizens now play a collective part in determining the conditions of the later years of life.

Here we begin to see the other side of the coin: the "win" for individual seniors. By helping out, the older individual "may discover" two main things: (1) that their health improves, and (2) that they gain a sense of belonging in the community. The latter advantage requires little explanation, as a sense of community would seem almost inevitably to dovetail with involvement in it. The true foundations for claiming the individual's win rests, instead, with the proposed

amelioration in health. There is an ever-proliferating corpus of research that draws connections between the extent of an older person's participation in "social exchange", and his/her measures of well-being. The nature of the evidence remains to be worked out, but there is a broad consensus that the kind of connectedness that volunteer positions offer is crucial to the health status of older Americans.

The equation for "helping out" as it stands, does, indeed appear to be a "winner" on all fronts. Juxtaposed with William's practices and desires, however, there still appears to be a missing element. William's routine giving reveals an aspect of late-life fulfillment that is not easily folded into a calculus where harmony (and trade-offs), rather than power and hierarchy, undergird the conceptual apparatus. As explained above, though he may sometimes crave social connections (and surely values his health), William is primarily resolved to earn and maintain distinction and respect. The terms, though they would appear to be appropriate measures of welfare, are conspicuously absent from the "win-win" ideology. As such, pinning one's hopes of late-life fulfillment on strategies derived from this perspective risks losing sight of what may be most meaningful for some as they perform their aging identities. Even if this study had the methodological purchase, it would not aim to call into question the value of research that has clearly helped to identify key aspects to a happy senescence. It serves only, I hope, to point to possible blind spots that so often emerge within the strength of a dominant discourse.

Concluding Remarks

If Sennett is right, and *Caritas* remains a central path to respect in American life, transparent maneuvering among older men to secure the role of "giver" should not be overly surprising. In William's case, even where there is no official designation at stake, the enactment of a giver/provider role affords confirmation of a distinguished social status that is central to maintaining his notion of self. Does his routine provide further confirmation of Savishinsky's view that there is moral compunction for the elderly to "give back" in America? Perhaps. In the broader scheme of his late life, William is probably more "beneficiary" than he is a "benefactor"; he receives assistance with housing, with daily money management, and benefits from a check-in telephone service for "high-risk" seniors. Though he did not express the sentiment to me, it is possible that he feels guilty about what he receives (and has received throughout life). Maybe this is why he gives gifts in his quotidian rounds, and routinely eschews receiving them. This assessment, however, focusing as it does on the maintenance of a moral ledger, seems rather insufficient for explaining William's actions. His other-directed activity as he ages *does* seem to be about tending to personal status, but one that hinges on a high/low dichotomy, rather than one that separates good from bad. The nature of the very material William transfers signal an identification with an *intelligensia,* and serve as status markers integral to cultivating and performing a distinct kind of aging self.

Chapter 5 - George: A Quiet Search for a Protégé

Opening

It was clear that I had made a mistake. George (b. 1931) and I were feeling restful and rather content after having enjoyed the holiday lunch served at the Presbyterian Church near his apartment. But I could see that I'd altered the mood of my acquaintance when I raised the topic of a men's group I'd recently helped to start at a community center across town. I asked George whether I would be seeing him over there on Monday mornings, since I knew he was a fairly regular attendee at the seniors' lunch served in the same building. He had also been to one of the meetings already, but then I hadn't seen him at subsequent gatherings. George's face slipped ever so slightly from what had seemed like the permanent grin he carried: "I don't… you know, Dylan… it's all pretty worldly for me over there." Cryptic as that may sound here, I thought I knew what George meant – he is a practicing Buddhist, and he insists that he would far rather sit in his small apartment meditating on eternal One-ness than spend his days socializing for its own sake.

I also knew, however, that George was a fairly affable fellow, and that he always seemed to get up for the one-on-one discussions we would have at his home. Could it really be that much different with a half-dozen extra bodies in the

room? Having already noted the facial twist, I didn't want to push him much further, so I merely reminded him of the times we had set for upcoming meetings. "The truth is," he began, addressing my query again, "I just get so sick of hanging around with old people. They're always complaining about their health, and about politics…I don't really know how you can be so patient [in the meetings]." He added, "It would be much more interesting to me if you could arrange to have some younger people go to this group. Then, I might come." So there was the rub. George didn't mind the idea of the gatherings themselves – it was the company that bothered him.

On the surface, the logic of George's objection appears somewhat absurd: an older person who explicitly avoids an event because of the older people in attendance. But, of course, this reading relies on an over-simplification, where the blanket category "old" stands in to characterize individuals who are socially located in multiple ways (Jones, 2006, p.80). However, I do think that there is something to be made of the discord indicated by this brief episode. In the course of my research, I became accustomed to hearing men express sentiments similar to those voiced by George. Individuals were often frustrated by the fact that their social lives were largely segregated by age, and many were anxious to find a way to gain more exposure to those on the other side of generational divides.

This chapter examines an instance of the dissatisfaction occasionally expressed by the study's men with the quality of personal connections available to

them on a daily basis. George's story illustrates a desire to reach out beyond one's age group that represents, in part, the hope to alter a predictable, routinized life, and one that is circumscribed by the very physical spaces he navigates. However, there is also an element of the search that betrays a desire to pass on a certain kind of knowledge to younger individuals. Given the research population - adults with no children, often distant from family - the expression of this impulse may come as no surprise. However, it is important to note that, in George's case, and in the case of most of the men here, no regrets were voiced about remaining childless. While several men recounted vexed attempts to foster interaction with younger individuals, the effort itself was not generally considered to be a function of childlessness.

Alexander and his colleagues find that aging, childless women seek out ways of simulating mothering relationships as they try to satisfy generative impulses in their later years (1991, p.429). As Dykstra and Hagestad point out, though, many U.S. studies suggest that "…motherhood appears to be a more important constituent of femininity than fatherhood is of masculinity" (2007, p. 1285). Rather than positing an analogous push to consider a "fathering" drive here, I continue to treat the quest for intergenerational connection as part of the study's broader inquiry into the trials of men's self-constitution and self-fulfillment in later life. An idealized gender role - in this case, the manhood that fatherhood confers - may

influence this dynamic at some level, but it does not appear to serve as a primary factor shaping desires to connect with the young.

At times, the expression of George's desire to reach across generations seemed geared towards enhancing companionship, pure and simple. There is no question that he was looking to younger adults to help to rejuvenate his day-to-day existence. And yet, curiously, George's urge to connect stops short of a desire to get truly involved in close relationships. He aims to share intensely personal elements of his life, to be sure, but is somewhat ambivalent about the reciprocation this might entail. As we have already seen with William in chapter 4, navigating such a tricky path to fulfillment could be frustrating. Among never-married older men he interviewed for a Philadelphia-based study (Rubinstein, et al., 1992), Rubinstein portrayed similar vexed late-life tensions as by-products of the fact that his men were fiercely protective of their independence, both in terms of self-reliance, and where and what they choose to be; in other words, childless seniors have spent much of life "blaze(ing) their own trail" (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007, p.1295). Despite this overall ambivalence, George's managed expectations did allow him to find contentedness on a small stage, and to narrate an identity that mattered.

Itinerant Beginnings

George was born to a Jewish family in Romania, but moved to Hungary as a boy where his father had owned a successful lumber company. The family's comfortable life in Budapest quickly vanished, however, when the Nazis occupied the country in World War II, and stripped George's father of this business without compensation. Several members of the family, including George, were detained in German concentration camps for several months near the end of the war. While George did lose family members during the war, none of his immediate family died in the camps; George, his brother, and his parents managed to survive, and reunited in Switzerland after the war.

The family subsequently lived a peripatetic existence, as George's father insisted they move "far away" from Europe to ensure that his boys would be spared being drawn into any further senseless violence as they came of military age. After several years in Geneva, George lived in Sydney, Australia for seven years before moving to Toronto, Canada in 1955. George's father died there in the late 1950s, and while George's brother stayed put in Canada, George and his mother moved to San Francisco together in 1962.

George arrived in the United States as what he called a "total stranger", with only $2000 in savings in hand. Despite these tight circumstances, George indicated to me that it was important to him to live apart from his mother when they arrived in the United States. This reluctance to share a place had nothing to do with their

relationship, which he says was "very good", and everything to do with her vocation. George explains: "My mother was a piano teacher, you know, and I didn't particularly care to listen to beginners playing on the piano."

Fortunately, though George's mother spoke virtually no English, she managed to find enough students to afford her own apartment, where she lived until she died in 1970. George himself was also "lucky enough" to find a studio apartment rental for $50/month. He also got help from his landlady in finding a sales job at a men's "collegiate" clothing store where she was also a cashier. George stayed in this job for nearly twelve years, before it grew altogether too tedious for him to endure:

> They treated me very well, but I became so bored with it…it became so monotonous. Union regulations made it so that you couldn't do any stock work after 11am, so for hours I would stand there. You weren't allowed to read anything, since, you know, it doesn't look good if a customer walks in. You're not even supposed to sit down. So you walk up and down, up and down, and you feel a little like a lion in a cage. After 11 years, I really felt like I needed a change.

George moved on from the sales job, but never found any work that was quite as steady after this initial experience. He invested $2000 in a retail juice bar business an acquaintance had started, and worked in the store for a time as part of the arrangement. He characterized this work as "delightful" while it lasted, especially since he could eat all of the delicious healthy food they offered for free. However, at this point in the early 1970s, George was beginning to meet a variety

of acquaintances who were exploring a more spiritual life, and he decided to follow this path himself. He left the juice business, and committed himself to learning as much as he could about Buddhism and (eventually) Hinduism. After becoming ordained as a Buddhist priest, he left San Francisco for several years spanning the mid- to late- 1970s to practice with a well-known guru residing in Santa Cruz, California.

George came back to the city and to retail sales in 1979, but explained that the series of sales jobs he worked in the decade or so after his return were rather unpleasant. Either the work was bland and repetitive, or the management was distinctly unfriendly. Or sometimes both at once. George finally retired for good in 1993, and he welcomed the transition to a life without work: "I was very eagerly awaiting it, you know, and I haven't been bored for one day. Every day is becoming more free and more joyous."

Now in his mid-seventies, George's monthly income is largely fixed at about $1000. His living comes from his accrued Social Security benefits, a small union pension, as well as the payout from a minor retirement investment. Those remaining of George's family live far away, and he is only in touch with two of his cousins on rare occasions. As noted above, George's profession of contentedness with the solitary rhythm in his current life conveys an incomplete message, as he experiences significant frustration in his daily navigation of social spaces.

Making the Rounds

Senior Spaces

The chapter's introduction explains that George wants to steer clear of a men's group in order to get a break from other old people. In the context of his quotidian life, his plea is really not all that surprising. George is not merely a senior center "regular", he is a regular at several different centers; he chooses to move around to different centers during the course of the week, so that he attends a lunch program each and every weekday, and sometimes on Sunday as well.

His primary motivation in making his rounds to different senior lunches is to find the best value in food that is available on any given day, and this requires that he adapt to what is available. Three or four times a week, he makes his way to a centrally located community center with a significant African-American clientele; he gets to a Jewish center for a meal once a week; he also gets down at least once weekly to a center adjacent to a heavily touristed part of town, frequented by a relatively affluent population that is primarily white and Asian-American; finally, he attends a church lunch service on the outskirts of the Tenderloin on special occasions, as they are known to offer a tasty meal on holidays.

There is clearly some variety to the lunch schedule George has worked out, but the glaring constant is that all of these centers serve seniors exclusively. As was noted above, George finds patterns of conversation and social interaction to be largely unfulfilling in these settings. He encounters the same crowd from one week

to the next in the different venues, and suggests he does not "have a heckuva lot in common with them". According to George, other older people he encounters are mostly absorbed in particular bodily (mal)-functioning, or else their personal and political opinions have calcified to such an extent over time that they make for lousy conversationalists. George acknowledges that it may not be easy to find a match for his particular personal interests - he is, after all, fond of discussing rather esoteric spiritual matters - but he says that he has learned to lower his expectations. By now, he is merely looking for interesting discussion on any topic, and is not, as he puts it, "asking the world".

Katz demonstrates that discourses engendered and reproduced by social services administrations and other governmental bodies make groupings by age seem "natural", effectively erasing other differences among older people, and drawing attention away from similarities between members of different generations (1996, p.61).[43] Can we count George's discontent with the senior center experience as a by-product of such "naturalized" spaces? Would more age diversity at the sites where George was served have transformed his experience? Or were George's interests so narrow that he was bound to find these shared spaces rather alienating? One thing is for certain: George craved a social environment where his outlook would be legible, and where people valued spiritual discovery.

[43] See also (Kohli, 2007; Walker, 2000).

George does have the option of staying away from the senior centers: he could choose to seek food and community at one of the many local soup kitchens that are open to all ages. It appears that, for George, differences in comfort and convenience, and especially avoiding long lines, trump any consideration of finding better company. Still, the differentiation in services by age - the fact that there *are* stark contrasts in resources available based on mere chronological markers - serve to perpetuate a distance between the young and old. Social programs for seniors serve as one of many "technologies of differentiation" embedded in the discourse of the modern life-course, effectively "…disciplining old age as a special part of the life course" (Katz, 1996, p.61). As is the case with the pensions and retirement schemes Katz discusses, specialized senior services have generally had a welcome effect for the welfare of seniors. Nevertheless, laments such as George's were fairly common for the study's men, showing that the segregated social space this differentiation can produce alienation where protection and support is intended.

Contrasting Visions

It was somewhat difficult for me to relate to George's comments about the tenor of discussion at the centers, particularly his complaint about single-mindedness among his age peers. In the specific case of the men's group we alluded to in our conversation, George and I had fairly different impressions of the

sorts of dialogue that took place in the meetings. The half-dozen or so mainly Jewish regulars *were*, in fact, anxious to share their political opinions in the semi-public forum. And from week to week, one could certainly anticipate where (and by whom) adversarial lines in the sand would be drawn, as party leanings were made clear quite quickly. However, where George found it remarkable that I could "be so patient" when faced with older men regularly jawing at one another, I mostly came away from the meetings astounded by the mere fact that nobody had stomped off in anger or frustration. In one meeting, we watched a documentary about local seniors protesting the Iraq war, and it depicted the activists as heroic citizens. Reactions to the film were varied, and one member railed against what he saw as a "rubbish" message. To his mind, there was no way to negotiate with Arabs or Muslims, and he suggested that it might be necessary to attack the entire Muslim Middle East. Most of the others agreed that this logic was faulty, and the debate became rather heated. However, as always, the men managed to resume chatting with civility once everyone had said their piece, and it seemed that most had enjoyed the vitality of the meeting.

The other facet of the meetings that was remarkable to me was the men's willingness to speak freely about personal matters that were sometimes very painful. On more than one occasion, a man in his mid-eighties named Nelson opened up to share lamentations about living on after his wife's death. He told the group that he periodically sank into a kind of paralysis as he considered his plight,

where no amount of distraction could help him to move on with his current life. The response from the group was fairly uniform, though some members kept quiet. Another widower, Gerry, had a reaction that was typical of the others, but also built on his own personal experience with spousal loss: he encouraged Nelson to "get involved", to ensure that he could have some distraction from his loneliness living without his wife. He believed that, just as he himself had once been, Nelson was at an early stage of grieving, and that it would become easier with time.

In a separate meeting, another member in his late seventies, Gil, shared with the group that he had recently considered killing himself. He was charged in his old age with caring for his wife who was suffering from acute dementia, and had become overwhelmed with the intensity of the task. Gil immediately made sure to inform us that he had overcome his suicidal inclination, and that he had resumed finding great fulfillment in a variety of artistic endeavors that he worked on regularly. In a reaction that I found somewhat surprising, several of the group members expressed great curiosity about Gil's suicidal thoughts, essentially probing him to divulge more about what had led him to the precipice. Gil, in turn, was willing to revisit these painful moments, and to listen to others turn them around and around for closer scrutiny. With these wrenching expressions of emotional turmoil, as well as with the vociferous political debate, I often felt ready, as facilitator to the group, to try to steer the group away from the touchy matters at

hand.[44] While I did proceed to smooth things over in certain instances, I also learned over time that the group was more than willing to sit with the unease these moments engendered.

Apart from what I have mentioned above - the tedium of political discussion, and others' personal health concerns - George and I never really did hash out what it was about the conversations that irritated and/or bored him so. In part, it seems to be the case that we were affected differently by the "touchy" moments I refer to here - while his eyes would roll, mine merely widened. It is not entirely clear to me why our takes were so different, other than the simple fact that we perceived such discussions from fairly different structural vantage points. He was a meeting attendee, seeking to find points of common interest to share with other attendees, and I was a meeting facilitator, charged with ensuring that everyone had a chance to voice their diverging interests, and that the group ran somewhat smoothly.

The formal dynamic was, of course, different when it came to senior center lunches, or to general social interaction outside of the men's group meetings. In such instances I was not a facilitator, though at one center I briefly served as an official volunteer. To a great extent, in terms of role and function, my position was close to that of the other regular center attendees. I often arrived sometime in the

[44] The group was officially a "men's group" that the center director had requested I start after she'd heard about one that I helped to run at another senior center. It was not intended to serve as a therapy group, though the boundaries between interest groups and support groups are sometimes fuzzy. To make matters worse, while I was facilitating the group, we never did really get around to deciding on what our purpose was, i.e. Why a men's group?

hour before lunch was served, socialized as I walked around the center, and sat down to the meal as it was served. I helped out staff at some centers more than at others, but this routine was fairly consistent overall. As such, just like George, I engaged in most of my informal conversations at senior centers either around a communal table, or in the moments prior to, or just following, a noontime meal.

As much as I wanted to "blend in" to these scenes, however, there was never any denying that my presence at the table was unusual. After all, apart from staff, volunteers, and the occasional family visitor, these spaces were designed to be exclusively for seniors. As such, I believe that, even after many visits to the same centers, my presence greatly affected the conversations I was ultimately privy to in such settings.[45] For one thing, unlike George, I rarely heard center regulars complain about personal health matters. Perhaps with a younger man sitting at the table, attendees were more conscious about falling into stereotypes of agedness. Beyond this possibility that folks put on a "brave face" for me, I suspect that a significant part of the difference in George's experience, and mine, is due to the fact that the respective demands for empathy on each of us was quite different; in effect, our respective forms of participation were each subject to different rhythms. I could drop in to acknowledge the rough patches in people's lives, and to

[45] The research of Stephenson and his colleagues (P. Stephenson, Wolfe, Coughlan, & Koehn, 1999, 397-98) demonstrates that, quite apart from age differences, a qualitative researcher's gender can have a particularly dramatic effect on the narratives elicited from older men and women.

commiserate with them in a fairly protracted, intense, moment. If it were a study participant I was listening to, I would probably have a chance to follow up with them on their troubles shortly. But it is more likely that I had heard of someone's troubles in passing, as it were, and as I was constantly moving between centers and participants' homes, I might not hear of them again. In contrast, George was in a position where he was faced with fairly constant personalities at the centers he frequented, and thus a great deal of repetitiveness, welcome or not. Ultimately, being a "regular" in a discreet social space exacts a particularly demanding sort of understanding of others who share the space. Even at the physical sites where I put in the time to qualify as a "regular", I ultimately could never quite occupy this role because of my age and my position as fieldworker.

George and Dennis

George's general weariness with the social life at the centers does not mean that his experiences are altogether unpleasant, or that he is *only* driven to go in order to save on weekly expenses. Here he briefly describes the routine at the center he frequents most (three times a week), the Hilltop Center:

> The way it works is that they have one item, and if you don't like that, they have chicken seven days a week - they're open seven days a week.[46] It's mostly a Black thing at the Hilltop Center…they have things like Turkey neck, they tell me that it's a cultural thing with them. I go with the chicken (laughing), since it's really a big piece that they give you. And they give you a decent serving of vegetables, and you know, there's also a

[46] George explained that he rarely went for lunch on weekends, primarily because he regularly frequented a spiritual center in the East Bay.

> nice salad. And another thing I really enjoy is that they give you a glass of buttermilk, and I love buttermilk! And a great thing is that they give you a big bag of groceries on Wednesdays.

This enthusiastic description of this center's meals prompted me to ask George whether, as with the fare, socializing could also be more satisfying at one center rather than another. The following conversation ensued:

> G: Not really… [but] you know at the Hilltop, I have… do you remember Dennis? He goes there almost every day. In fact, he's the one who told me about it, and I sit at a table with him, and a couple of his friends. We are the "White table" and almost everybody else is either Chinese or Black.
>
> D: And how does that feel? To be the only ones…
>
> G: It feels fine… we are treated the same as everyone. [In fact] there's a nutritionist who comes and she goes out of her way to come to see us first, and asks if we have any questions…. it's really great.

The convivial atmosphere enjoyed by George at these lunches with Dennis extends beyond the center as well, but their personal relationship appears to have some limitations. George described the parameters of the relationship for me: "We talk often on the phone, for about an hour sometimes… we talk really well together, about all sorts of topics. He's got a really good sense humour, and he's also very smart." George pointed out, however, that this telephone dialogue was also about the extent of the interactions: "We don't social…go out together, to a movie, or to a restaurant. He's been over to my place a couple of times, I've been

to his place a couple of times. We don't really socialize; we just talk on the phone, or we see each other two or three times a week at the center." George stopped short of expressing clear disappointment with these elements that circumscribe his relationship with Dennis, nor did he offer explicit reasons for the limits.

Certainly with George's modest income, he cannot afford to socialize or eat with any kind of regularity at restaurants or other private establishments in a pricey city like San Francisco (nor, I suspect, would Dennis have been able to). However, this would not explain why the two men rarely pay visits to one another's homes, or why they refrain from meeting in more accessible public spaces. Rubenstein's research with a similar population in Philadelphia shows that, quite often, the social life of the senior center is left at the senior center, so that any modicum of intimacy shown there will not necessarily translate to life outside the center (1986, p.169). And yet, for George and Dennis, the situation is slightly different, as they were acquaintances prior to any socializing at the Hilltop. George remarked at one point that he had gained some perspective on personal relations after longstanding friends left San Francisco somewhat abruptly:

> I had some other good friends, but they all moved away, you know; and this is what showed me how…everything things comes and goes. You make good friends with someone, and you think 'Hey, this person is going to be there for me for the rest of my life, and I'm going to be here for their lives, or whatever', and now they are in Florida, or one of my other friends is in South Carolina.

George's hesitance to become closer friends with Dennis could well have something to do with the fact that he is gun-shy after having been left behind before. This guardedness would be consistent with a general ambivalence George harbours about reaching out to others. Though he does see the appeal to developing intimacy with others, George also has clear convictions that his proper path to fulfillment is a solitary one. George never had any inclination to get married or to have children. He explained that he saw too many friends who expected too much from their marriages, adding that while they could make it "look the part" for a while, they often ended up divorcing their partners. Perhaps more importantly, he believes the institution of marriage would have taken away from a freedom to pursue a spiritual path.

George explained to me that his general uneasiness with intimacy extended to sexual relations as well, and said that though he is "mainly gay", he considered himself sexually inactive, for the most part. Rather than gradually waning in his later years, sexual activity had always been a fairly constant absence in George's life. He conceded that he did have longings for physical intimacy, and would (very) occasionally pay a young man from a commercial street near his apartment to come to bed with him. He often found these encounters to be embarrassing, however, since the sex worker would sometimes poke fun at him for simply wanting to be held closely. Though he never mentioned any sexual element to his relationship with Dennis, it is possible that their abridged relationship was

deliberately made so, by one party or the other, to avoid more intense vulnerabilities around sexual intimacy.

Limitations to their friendship notwithstanding, George's description of his amicable interactions with Dennis suggest that his experiences at the centers are characterized more by ambivalence than they are by pure misery. Nevertheless, the fact remains that there is something more he is looking for. In order to gain further insight into what George seeks as an older man, it is necessary to further consider his passion for spirituality.

The Promise of the Young

If George could have it his way, he would always have ample opportunity to discuss with others the philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of life. Though his family was Jewish, George never found much inspiration from the religious elements of his ethnic roots. When I suggested that a local Jewish senior's gathering would be a natural fit for him, he disabused me somewhat of the assumption I was making based on his familial background:

> I have a tremendous love for Jewish food, and I have an emotional attachment to Israel…but as far as the Jewish religion per se, you know, I don't have any attraction at all. When they sometimes have the special holiday meal at the Jewish center, and the Rabbi comes and starts talking about the Torah, I can't…I'm sorry. I never knock it, and I don't see anything wrong with it, but I just don't feel it's my thing, you know, any more than a Catholic would think it's his thing.

Here he describes how he began his own spiritual journey when he became exposed for the first time, in his late thirties, to Buddhism.

G: I met this Caucasian man who was an ordained Zen wise "Spirituarch".

D: That's quite a title!

G: (Laughing) Quite a title, yeah. He had spent years in meditation, in various Asian monasteries, and I went to a group where he was giving lectures and discourse in Buddhism, and it became… at first (more laughter), this is going to sound terrible, but I went because they served delicious snacks. But I started to go back every week, and I became hooked on the stuff…

D: Not the snack, but the…

G: No! (Laughter) more the teachings. It made a lot of sense to me. You know, because for a long time I was an Agnostic. I was never an Atheist, you know, I could never get to the point where I would think that "there cannot be a god". After having seen what I had seen in that concentration camp in World War II, for years and years it made it difficult to believe that there is a benevolent deity, that really cares for people. But at the time, I had the image of God like everybody else, of a…kind of like Santa Claus, higher person up in the sky who rewards and punishes, you know, very, very childish. So…and Buddhism doesn't talk about that; it talks about eliminating suffering from your life, and becoming totally clear and totally loving.

D: But, so, you were inspired by these meetings you were going to?

G: Yes. And about a year later, suddenly the priest came to me and says, "I really feel that you should become ordained as a Buddhist priest. That really floored me! It was the last thing that I expected. Because, you know, I had such faith in this teacher, and such trust, and I thought that if that's what he thinks that I should do…

Ever since this immersion, George has been less interested in the contemporary political and social problems that make the mainstream news, and more passionate about seeking ways to tap into metaphysical truths. He moved to Santa Cruz, California, for a time in order to expand his spiritual horizons with a resident guru versed in the Hindu scriptures. He continues to follow a path combining the wisdom of different teachers and different creeds, but mostly finds himself at pains to share his understanding. According to George, though he and Dennis sometimes did find the opportunity to broach some of life's deeper questions, it is on the whole very rare to find people his own age who enjoy such existential exploration. It is even less common, in his experience, to find a peer with the humility to remain open to new knowledge from a learned companion like himself. Here he contrasts general attitudes he sees differentiating young and old, and illustrates his view with a story where he went ahead to try to share his knowledge:

> D: Is it easier to transmit some of these spiritual messages to younger people, rather than peers your own age?
>
> G: Yes, definitely. I find young people to be much more open…older people are much more settled in their ways. You know, I'll tell you, I knew an [older] man whose close friend had died, and he was grieving about it when I saw him. So, to give him something just…wonderful at the time, I lent him a book by Yogananda, that describes these beautiful otherworldly states (that are still unreal, of course).

> I could see that he was too polite [to reject my offering outright]…I can always see just by looking at their facial expressions to what degree they are open. Body language, you know. I also copied out this thing for him about the unreality of death, and it took me about fifteen minutes. I wrote it out carefully, you know, and when I gave it to him, he pretty much just crumpled it up, and put it in his pocket. As if to say, I'll put it in the garbage…

George explained that while he rarely experiences this sort of rejection now, it is only because, for the most part, he refrains from offering spiritual guidance to friends and acquaintances. After having learned some hard lessons early on, just after his spiritual awakening, he made a habit of holding his tongue about his ever-growing knowledge of the metaphysical realm. George describes this earlier period, prior to his decision to keep his views to himself:

> D: Were there particular times in your life when you tried to share more of this spiritual insight?
>
> G: When I first became a Buddhist, you know, I really tried to tell everyone about it. And then I saw that… like when you first become a vegetarian, you try to get the whole world to quit eating meat. I was like that, at the beginning; no matter what a friend would start talking about, I found a way to sneak it in! But then I learned, you know, luckily pretty fast, to see how open people are to it first…

While George is much more inclined to keep his views to himself these days, he alluded to an instance in the recent past where there had been an opportunity to share.

> "You know," he said, "once in a while…very few things give me as much joy, other than a great meditation, than finding somebody that's open to that [spiritual guidance]. You know, like at the Jewish center once in a while, a young guy would work at the desk; this particular Russian guy who was studying yoga, and these kinds of teachings, and I would copy out certain sayings from sages for him, and he was always so appreciative, and thankful, and open. And the appreciation was just a bonus. It made me feel so good to be able to share that, you know, because it's like if you had a magic wand, and you could wave it and have everyone happy and healthy, you know…just joyous, and knowing who they are, who they truly are. We'd never have another war, and the police force and the military would be out of business."

Here, George gives us a glimpse of the sort of exchange that gives him great satisfaction as he is getting older. His description of his own feelings about the event are somewhat curious; in particular, the tenor of the reaction of the young man is both welcomed by George, at the same time it is deemed somewhat superfluous. George remarks that the man was appreciative and thankful for the gifts imparted to him, but also adds that this gratitude was a "bonus". This suggests that the man's reciprocation by acknowledgment, while necessary for the exchange, was neither a sufficient nor really an essential aspect of George's fulfillment. Instead, the key element to his "joy" was the man's mere "openness", so that George could begin to a share his own vision. And though the spread of George's vision may appear to be limited to these incipient gestures, in these brief moments, George's narration of the event also signals for the possibility of expanding this vision almost infinitely with the wave of his "magic wand".

Rubinstein and his colleagues (1992) identify a compression of the life-world for isolated seniors, where resonance with the external social landscape is replaced with an intensification of meaning-making within the domestic sphere. George's physical isolation is not especially acute, but one can see that he derives tremendous significance from fleeting moments that arise as he passes through his routine day, where the "stage" appears almost too small to serve his ambitions. He takes advantage of such moments not only to demarcate a worthy identity for himself - the wise elder, perhaps - but also to reach further to momentarily bring alive a utopian vision that contains the absolute rendition of the understanding he aims to share.

George is generally fairly quiet about his desire to transmit a spiritual spark to others, however, and is rather more likely to talk about the fulfillment he seeks in his own solitary spiritual practice. Nevertheless, his words clearly evoke the release he felt as he successfully passed on some of his insight to this young man. As noted, the experience at the community center depicts only a passing moment in George's life, and does not reflect the enduring quality that we commonly associate with established, meaningful relationships (Schneider, 1980 (1968)) . As a final foray into George's interest in intergenerational connection, it is further instructive to consider a longer-term friendship he had developed with a younger man.

A Friend and a Companion?

George first got to know David (b. 1962) in 1987 at a Buddhist spiritual center in Berkeley they both attended on weekends. George's San Francisco apartment was on David's way in his trip across the Bay, and the two men became friends as David began to give George a regular ride to and from the center. The two men are on similarly intense spiritual quests, and this common ground seems to override any awkwardness stemming from their 30-year difference in age. According to George, David's indifference to the age gap was palpable from early in their relationship: "I could tell that he didn't think of me as an old man, but just as a "fellow spiritual aspirant".

By the time I first met George, he considered David to be his best (and only true) friend. The two not only continued to cultivate a conversation about spiritual learning, but they also routinely supported one another in other, more practical aspects of their lives as well. George could barely contain his gratitude for his friend's willingness to help him out with some of the difficulties that had arisen for him as he began to grow older. Here he explains that David's support led him to a definitive decision about the divestment of his own material possessions:

> I am leaving everything to my friend, David. All my money, and my books, and everything that's in the apartment. You know because all these years that I've known him, he's always been a help… he does my taxes, he does my annual renter's rebate for low-income people. And he always gives me a ride to Berkeley, to the spiritual center, and he told me about it. [Not only that, but] When I had my sciatica problem, I could barely walk, and he took me all over the place so that I could get to my appointments.

George's comments about his assets demonstrate that he felt the need to pay David back, and that he felt an end-of-life divestment would provide the best opportunity to accomplish such reciprocation. George's overall accumulations were modest, however, as he'd neither made nor saved much money over his lifetime. The books he spoke of were part of a modest collection he kept on two or three shelves in his bedroom, and none of the other material items in his spare apartment would have fetched much were they to be sold in any marketplace for used goods. Still, the prospect of transferring the items to David had a satisfying aspect beyond the mere need to reciprocate: the books, posters, and documents that had a spiritual element to them would resonate with David, while they would not with a vast majority of people.

This foreseen avenue for transmitting value to David could not quite hide the fact that there remained a troublesome asymmetry to the exchanges at the core of their relationship. Or perhaps it was rather too much symmetry? George spoke with conviction about his affection for David, and about how pleased he was to share his spiritual passion with a like-minded friend. However, as David was already fully versed in Buddhist tenets as well as other forms of spirituality, he could not very well play the role of younger protégé ready to glean George's wisdom. In fact, it seemed that George could, at times, feel slightly intimidated by David, whose

spiritual capital was bolstered by periodic journeys to Asian destinations to meet with a variety of sages and spiritual scholars.

It was following one of David's pilgrimages that, in George's eyes, their friendship had taken a puzzling turn. David had returned from a sojourn in India in the summer of 2003, and George sensed fairly quickly that something was amiss. While previously the men had always engaged in healthy discussion in their car rides together to the center, especially just after David had returned from a journey with news about another place, now David was highly resistant to such conversation. According to George, David explained at the time that his Indian guru had encouraged him to pursue his quest inwardly, and that, as such, he would increasingly need to withdraw from "unnecessary conversation" with George.

In theory, George could understand David's decision, as well as the rationale he had given for taking it. He could identify with the need to be alone in contemplation, and the desire to close off from attachments in what, in their shared creed, amounted to an illusory world. At the same time, George was confused by David's behaviour. While David would only say one or two words to George in their passage to Berkeley, he seemed to have ample time for some of the people they met on the other end of their car ride. Beyond this contradiction, George just could not really see why it was necessary to sacrifice a major element of their friendship to steal a few additional moments of inward searching; as he put it,

"…there is a difference between avoiding 'unnecessary conversation' and saying just one word."

Despite the fact that he was clearly irked about the situation with David, George did not want to make a big fuss about it. In fact, he explained to me that he was trying to use the situation as a means of furthering his own spiritual growth: "I guess I'll just watch it for the time being. And one thing I really want to learn is not to react; it would be very easy to make a big deal about it, and to get into an argument, but I won't do that." It seemed sure that George would indeed avoid any confrontation with his friend, but it was less certain how this episode might eventually alter his view of their relationship. It was also unclear whether the emerging limits on communication would end up affecting prior decisions George had made about his will.

After George had finished telling me about the new circumstances with David, he and I revisited our earlier conversation about the fate of his material possessions. George had wanted to show me some of the religious paraphernalia he wanted David to have, that mainly consisted of paintings and other varieties of texts and prints. George explained that it only made sense for David to have all of them, since his spiritual understanding would allow him to fully appreciate the value of the items. Despite the soundness of his reasoning, George himself appeared only partially convinced by his own words. When I asked him if the recent change in his relationship with David made a difference on this count, he

replied in a half-joking manner: “Who knows? Maybe I will have to do some more thinking about that”.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Ethnographer as (Younger) Companion?

The focus of this chapter brings to the forefront a reflexive thread that, while occasionally broached, remains behind the scenes for much of the dissertation. That is, the extent to which, in my position as fieldworker, I end up participating in the very exchanges that I try to document. In the present case: did I in some sense become the younger companion that George was seeking connection with? And if so, with what effect on his performance of aging? Did I disrupt an expected pattern, or was my intervention into his life simply part in parcel with other relationships he was used to having?

I believe that, though many of the men were very quick to show me the kind of trust that one associates with longer term relationships, most of them regarded my presence as a brief interruption to the flow of their lives - sometimes a nuisance, sometimes a welcome break - and perhaps as a chance to tell a story they’d been meaning to tell (or, more likely, that they often told). There were also occasions where I was clearly regarded with suspicion, and where an interview never even got to the stage where either interlocutor could speak freely. Because many of the men expressed a specific desire to connect with younger adults, though, there was occasionally a sense in which I walked right onto the stage of an

ongoing performance; and despite the fact that I had not exactly been cast for the part of the younger companion (why was I asking so many repetitive questions if I was meant to provide a refreshing change to social life?), participants were mostly happy enough to improvise. In a select few cases, my presence appeared to fit uncannily with a desired vision of late life held by the individual participant. George, who sought the "openness" of the younger companion for articulating his view of life, fit quite clearly into this category.

George informed me that he considered me a "kindred spirit" of sorts, mainly because I was fond of discussing the Eastern philosophies in which he had immersed himself. Some tenets of Buddhism have always attracted me for their surface simplicity, but I have also had trouble reconciling a withdrawal from earthly desires with the everyday demands of human sociality. George was pleased when I pressed him on these matters, and in some ways I approximated the figure of the young man in the gym who had also showed an interest in the spiritual life that George aimed to share. It is possible that I also fell short of assuming this role, though, as I did not have enough interest to further extend a dialogue with George regarding certain reading materials he loaned to me. George never said as much to me, however, and perhaps he was again satisfied with yet another encounter with "openness", whereby he could enact a unidirectional teaching performance.

Beyond our discussions about his spiritual beliefs, George and I found it fairly easy to talk openly about personal matters. This may have been due to the

fact that, on at least one occasion, we found ourselves at oddly similar points in respective friendships. At the same time that George was going through the distancing between he and David, I too had essentially severed with a close male friend. Like George, I found myself flummoxed about some of the events that led up to the "break up", and this shared sentiment allowed us to explore expectations and norms around male friendship in a fairly organic way. This two-way conversation undoubtedly has something to do with the fact that George quite explicitly told me that he felt he could trust me with personal information about his life. However, he also said that his trust followed from an intuitive sense that I was an open-minded person; as he put it, "I can tell by looking at your face". This quality was, for George, a necessary condition for friendship because then it would follow that "you can talk to them about anything without thinking, 'whoops', they might be judgmental about that." Here he made an explicit contrast between the bond of this sort of friendship, and the sort of connection he had with "most of the folks I see at senior centers."

Abbreviated Exchange

I devote the space above to my relationship with George because I believe it is has use as a jumping-off point for discussion, and a return to a central point embedded in the exposition above. To begin with, our relationship could (and did) strike the casual observer as rather unusual, i.e., who was this younger man who showed up occasionally to strike up such intense discussions with old George?

However, in a funny way, with respect to its rhythm, our mode of interaction was actually commonplace for George. Consider: though I am confident in saying that it was a pleasant interaction for both parties, its primary quality may have been that it was abbreviated. As an older man, George was used to knowing people in bits and pieces, as it were, and with taking what he could get from these encounters.

It is tempting to consider George's retreat into the solitude of his spiritual quest as little more than a way of coping with his social position. As an old, childless man with very little means, George's chances to develop the sorts of intergenerational relations he seeks are fairly low. To put it somewhat glibly, he travels in the wrong circles. It appears to be easier (and perhaps less painful) for him to focus within himself, where he has more control of whatever fulfillment he can gain. So when an opportunity to develop the hard understanding that often goes with close relations arises - as it probably did when David pushed him away - George may be disappointed, but he is also resigned to leaving it be. This tendency to retreat from (preempt) the complexities of intimate relations does not, however, seem to be anything particularly new to George. Since his early adulthood, he has been either unable or unwilling to forge the enduring bonds that serve as one of the prime markers of adulthood in contemporary society. When we spoke of the matter, George even hearkened back to his childhood years:

D: So, as far as long-term partnership goes, it never ever struck you as [desirable)?

G: I've always been sort of a…I don't know if loner would be the right way of putting it, but I always felt very comfortable being in my own company. Even when I was a kid, when I was in school, and other kids be would racing around and screaming, and you know how kids love to…play wrestle with each other and yell and all that…I would go for a little walk, or just sit somewhere.

D: You needed some distance…

G: I remember when I was at a dance, when I was in high school, and all the kids were jumping around, and I would just sit like this (very still) with my eyes closed. And one of the kids said, "hey, look, there's George sitting like he's a Buddha…This is about when I was 14 or 15 years old."

George accepts this comfort in distancing as part of his own character, both now as an older man as well as when he was young. With this in mind, I believe that talk of resignation to one's lot in late life is somewhat misleading, in George's case, as well as in the case of most men in this study. This is because it implies that George's ultimate goal is to immerse himself in the complexity of intimate relationships, and all their concomitant emotions. Moreover, it suggests that he is, in a sense, forced to accept that he will not reach such a goal. However, as much as loving relationships may carry the "burden of transcendence" in the society he inhabits (Bauman, 1992, p.28), such intense contact does in fact *not* seem to be George's primary interest.

We have seen through his brief encounter with the young man at the gym that "openness" on the part of his interlocutor is more important than any

reciprocal gestures made to solidify an enduring interpersonal bond. The joy that George feels is taken instead from the simple fact that he has a found an avenue and target for extending valued elements of himself. Like most everyone, George needs confirmation that the values and ideas he has incorporated within his identity, and the life he has lived, are also deemed worthy by others.[47] When he finds this opportunity, it allows him to secure a particular image of self within his specific social world. When this opportunity comes with a younger person, it also allows him to envision a lasting embodiment of his cherished values.

In this sense, then, George does not demonstrate resignation at all, but rather works arduously to ensure that his is an identity of some consequence. He may not fight to build his relationships *qua* relationships, yet he is interested in seeing that his interpersonal contact has the kind of impact it might have if he were truly involved in an intimate relationship. Indeed, the irony in George's case seems to be that all-too-brief, occasional encounters provide the reward that cannot be matched by the longer-term friendship within which he was immersed.

George's identity-work may seem to operate at a somewhat abstract level, rather removed for a domain such as intimacy. It is tempting to read the performance as pragmatic maneuvering to protect against the vicissitudes of late life. After all, it is possible that, were George to commit himself to the true search

[47] Treating the absence of such confirmation, Bahktin writes of the suffering brought about by "nonrecognition" (Kaminsky, 1992, p.11).

for the exchange of loving gestures, he may perhaps encounter ever more painful frustration. By restricting his forays to seeking "openness" in these occasional encounters, it does seem that he reduces his own vulnerability and improves the chances of "success" at one and the same time. However, we know that George has steered clear of intimacy for as long as he can remember. Given this, it is more likely that George is merely repeating a performance that has become ingrained in his being. In other words, he carries into maturity limited intimacy possibilities that have coloured his exchange relations throughout life. Only now, as he gets older, these play out against a different horizon, and signal the possibility of being alone in death, rather than merely being alone in life. And though this existential turn appears rather bleak, it is also important to recognize that George's narrow parameters of exchange do not preclude a freedom to dream of possible scenarios where one's weight in the world is magnified many times over; in fact, as we see with George's utopian vision where all are joyous and content, this fantastical component seems to be close at hand.

Juxtaposed with the stories from earlier chapters, the distancing and unidirectionality that characterize George's identity-work begins to appear as a motif of sorts. William, in chapter 4, tended to be less interested in fostering actual relationships than he was with the impact of assuming the structural role of the "giver" in the minor gifts he routinely made. We saw a similar dynamic in the third chapter's treatment of family relations, where Walter was stuck with the vision that

he was a “twig” on the family tree. Again, despite his dissatisfaction with this image, he was not especially interested in cultivating existing connections with his living family members. Instead, he was focused on the unlikely scenario where he would transform himself by finding a woman to bear his children. While this imagined maneuver was, in one sense, all too concrete, the idea remained strictly fixed on resolving an abstract puzzle, with little thought of how its coming to fruition would alter his everyday life.

In one sense, the rather abstracted, contact-poor, versions of engaging in interpersonal relations featured here appear to be a kind of “settling” for second best. The abridged visions these men have might temporarily quell the frustrations of finding fulfillment in this arena, but would not seem to lay down paths for achieving intimate connection as it is conventionally understood. There may be some truth to this reading, but it is again worth noting that interpreting the situation thus requires a certain kind of elemental assumption about what these men *should* desire in late life. Namely, that they ought to be dissatisfied with the lack of human contact in their lives, and that they ought to be seeking fulfillment by rectifying this situation. This line of thinking extends the stereotype of the lonely, pitiable elder, who can be defined by his lack: he has no children, no family, and sometimes no friends.

One might alternatively look to gender difference to help clarify this tendency to limit social connections. Commonly embedded in both popular and scholarly

understandings of social relationships is the notion that women seek to join, while men prefer going it alone. Due to a lack of comparative evidence for the current study, this element of the equation necessarily remains unresolved. However, even were clear evidence of gender difference available, one would need to dig deeper to ascertain what might drive such variation. In other words, evidence of withdrawal from relationships is insufficient to denote a particular late life attitude – dissatisfaction with what others have to offer, for instance. Instead, it begs consideration within the context of possible paths to fulfilling aging.

Perhaps part of the trouble here is a tendency to discount a genuine concern, among older people, for establishing a "status" of sorts. In her account of the lives of older Bengali men and women, anthropologist Sarah Lamb presents evidence suggesting that establishing respect (*samman)* within one's community often trumps the quest to secure material resources, or to foster social connection in later life. Older "sonless" Bengali women who might well live with daughters in their natal town, with the families their daughters have married into, often choose instead to move to the city to reside at an old age home. They do so in order to avoid the stigma and disrespect of inappropriate dependency, as the only "rightful" position of dependence for an older adult is within a grown son's household (Lamb, 2000, p. 85).

George also appears to sacrifice social and material connections, if not necessarily comforts, in order to preserve a palatable social identity. However, his

interest in picking the occasional moment to provide spiritual mentorship demonstrates that he also actively modifies this identity in a way one might expect to see occur much earlier in life. George may be content to cultivate solitude, and to forego the return of an intimate bond, but his withdrawal from the world and its chatter has its limits: he has not given up on seeking "openings", so that he can enact a mentorship role that might live on.

Chapter 6 - Ray: A Quest for Companionship

Introduction

I often rode my bicycle around the streets of San Francisco during fieldwork, as it afforded me some mobility without having the hassle of trying to park a car. Most of the time, I met with the study's men in the enclosed, indoor spaces of senior centers, or residential apartments, after having locked up my vehicle outside. Occasionally, however, I met with a participant outdoors.

On a Tuesday evening in the summer of 2003, I met Ray (b.1929 - d.2004) on the corner of the block outside his apartment. I was a little late, and he seemed both pleased to see me and amused by my bicycle helmet as I rode up to greet him. It was the third time I had come to see him, and we were heading over to resume our running conversation at his favourite restaurant a couple of blocks away. I decided to get off of my bike, and remove my helmet, so that we could chat on the way over. Ray was, as always, in a motorized wheelchair, and he immediately led the way by starting off up the street. It was quickly apparent that it would be easier to talk when we arrived at our destination, and that I had made a mistake by dismounting, and removing my biking gear. Ray sped along the sidewalks, and zipped out into the road without hesitation whenever he needed to avoid an obstacle in his path. I considered scrambling to get back on my bicycle,

but instead found myself struggling to run alongside him, slowed, in part, by my tendency to marvel at his speed and dexterity on the chair. It turned out that his restaurant was closed, but his pace did not slow appreciably until we found a suitable alternative nearby.

I accompanied Ray through the streets on several subsequent occasions, and I was always half-impressed and half-aghast at his tendency to careen wildly along. He was no less impatient than many of the city's automobile drivers, even when there were small children impeding his path. It seemed that he took a certain pleasure in riding at what you might call a "confrontational" pace, and those he encountered in the streets often had trouble digesting the sight of what was coming at them.

Ray's driving style might well work as a metaphor for his overall manner, but significant obstacles in late life tempered what was sometimes an expressive, exuberant, way of greeting the world. Even sitting down, his body was large enough that it was hard for him to avoid announcing himself everywhere he went. However, as an older man, Ray felt increasingly hemmed in by this very body, and by the enclosed spaces that it traversed on a regular basis. Ray's body was constantly subject to a medical scrutiny in his later years, and, more often than not, this made him feel more like a "case" than an individual.

As a gay man, Ray also felt considerable ambivalence about the impact his sexuality had on his daily life. Expectations and stereotypes about gay sociality had

always given him trouble, and Ray was disappointed that these pressures remained ever-present in his later years. Unlike many of the study's men, a desire for regular companionship was foremost on Ray's mind as he got older. He was most interested in developing platonic relationships, either with a peer, or with a younger adult man. However, he found himself thwarted in this pursuit, and tended to blame it on an ethos of hypersexuality that pervaded gay men's lives.

Embodiment and Enclosure

I first met Ray at an LGBT seniors lunch meeting, and I would continue to see him there every two weeks, also occasionally visiting him at his South of Market apartment.[48] He was generally friendly with other participants at the group lunches, but the gathering itself was not exactly his scene. He appreciated the idea of carving out a space for older gay men and women to congregate, but he often found the post-meal discussions to be rather dull. More importantly, Ray let me know that he had never felt especially comfortable in queer-exclusive spaces, partly because of the common emphasis on playing up all manner of sexual signals. Ray had deliberately steered clear of neighbourhoods like San Francisco's Castro district for years, and he was disappointed that communication patterns in the seniors' group continued to revolve around the innuendo of sexual gratification.

The seniors' gatherings, though regular, only served as an occasional stopping-off point for Ray. He spent most of his time at home in his studio

apartment, or a few blocks away at a non-profit adult day health center (ADHC).[49] Ray had lived in the same apartment for nearly a decade, housed in a residential tower owned and managed by the Salvation Army. Since it was also a building regulated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), residents benefitted from federally subsidies on rental costs.[50] The apartments were nothing fancy, but the building is in a convenient location, and Ray knew that he had been fortunate to have been accepted as a resident. As he told it, he had just happened to be in the right place at the right time:

> It's the story of my life, really. Some gal at the center [senior services non-profit] liked me, and so I ended up on the board of directors [for the non-profit]. Then, somehow, I'm not sure, I was in! A lot cheaper than my old place…

Despite the fact that he considered himself lucky, Ray was also dissatisfied with his accommodations. His own apartment was not the problem; rather, Ray was unhappy about the fact that so few of the other building residents spoke English. He complained that it was next to impossible to get to know his neighbours:

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[48] Ray lived in HUD housing, in a residential tower owned by the Salvation Army.

[49] There are many varieties of ADHC facilities located in San Francisco, and licensed by the California Association for Adult Day Services. While the center Ray attended is a non-profit corporation, and accepts payment through the state-funded Medi-Cal program, this is not true for all licensed centers.

[50] Ray paid 33% of his income towards rent.

> It's the same thing [at the residence as elsewhere], people know me, and they're friendly enough, but they try to speak to me in Chinese! Ah, I guess there's nothing profound to say. My neighbour down the hall has kids who speak English, but they won't say anything…

This difficulty communicating with co-residents was irksome for Ray, and it represents part of broader frustrations he experienced as an older man. Ray felt that he had much to explore as he aged, but that the paths to discovery he envisioned were largely roped off. Part of what impeded him was his own, constant, corporeal self: An enormous man who was always out of breath, Ray suffered from diabetes and had experienced two heart attacks prior to my making his acquaintance. Not long after I got to know him, he had a stroke that severely impaired his ability to speak. Even before the stroke, Ray was largely confined to a wheelchair because of a condition called neuropathy, which made it difficult for him to keep balance or coordination, and for which he had his own regimen of prescription pills that he called "the pharmacy".

Although he lived alone, Ray did regularly receive in-home care, and was thankful for it. Two different Russian men from a city-sponsored agency would come to help with bathing and other primary care, as well as with laundry, meals, and general household up-keep. One man or the other would come in for an average of three hours every day of the week except Fridays.[51] Ray had few

[51] A gentleman named Misha worked during the week, and another named Vladimir worked on weekends.

complaints about the assistance, other than the fact that he was almost always on his own in the evenings. He found this to be a real challenge:

> I have a hard time with supper, and they're never around. I mean, just re-heating things, or making coffee…I have to do it in two rounds, you know. One for the grounds and the water, one for adding milk and sugar [sitting down in between]

Ray also mentioned that he could see that, at least for the weekend careworker, the work was bothersome and somewhat demeaning:

> It's [the work is] beneath him, I guess. Vladimir was a professional acrobat back in Russia, so he doesn't like where he is now. It comes out in his voice, you know, and he's always bringing in photographs to show me his life back there.

Despite this uneasy recognition, Ray understood that he was fairly fortunate to have the help to live independently, and he had made adjustments in the apartment to suit his needs. Living on the 16th floor afforded him a fine view of a cityscape from his full-sized bed set directly beside a large window. However, Ray often slept in an adjacent *chaise* that extended out to support his feet, as it was less trouble for him to get himself to the kitchen or bathroom at night.

From this semi-upright position in the *chaise*, Ray also had much easier access to the telephone and a better view of his television, which he kept tuned to a fine arts and performance channel for most of the day. His "pharmacy" was also handy from this position - all the pill bottles were kept on a shelf just to the right of his

chair - and his calendar was in plain view beside the TV. Nearly all of the dates on the calendar were marked with colour-coded stickers, indicating his schedule of care for the month, among other social occasions. Ray told me that he was not particularly fond of the colour green, but really only because it marked the days where he would have to leave the house to visit an outpatient care center (ADHC).

Ray clearly held the interest of medical authorities charged with monitoring and treating “at-risk” seniors. Sometimes, he could laugh off the overwhelming attention from nurses, doctors, and other care-workers. A local agency that checks up on seniors at risk for suicide persisted in calling him on the telephone daily, and he found it to be funny that they kept at it: “They don’t say it, but that’s what they’re after. Am I gonna? [Simulates shooting a gun at his temple.] C’mon! [Laughs loudly.]” He was not able to muster such a bemused tone, however, when he discussed his outpatient care at the nearby state-licensed Adult Day Health Center (ADHC). Rather, Ray referred to the center as “the dungeon", partly because it's in the basement of a building, and there isn't much light, but also partly because he felt as though it imprisoned him. Ray spent half-days at this center four days a week, but he also spent a considerable time and effort trying to convince center staff to reduce this amount of time.

Although Ray had no illusions about his need for care, he believed that the ADHC was simply not for someone like him. Ray indicated to me that the center was a place much better suited for someone who was “out of it”. When I asked

what this meant, he alluded to a man, Steve, who occasionally visited the gay seniors' lunch group. Steve was also in a wheelchair, but he could not contribute to the group's conversation, and was largely incapacitated. Ray explained that he saw much more of this sort of individual at the ADHC, and that, as a result, he felt he was out of place there.

The care staff at the health center disagreed with Ray, and they insisted that he maintain his near-daily schedule so that they could monitor his bodily functions. Ray understood that the staff was trying to look out for him, but he resented the fact that their interventions extended so thoroughly into his day-to-day life. Here he conveys his frustration: "I don't want to be restricted, and they are constantly restricting what I eat and what I drink. I know that I need to monitor my blood sugar because I'm a diabetic. But I feel like it's cruel to not let older people do what they want - what difference does the time make at the end?" To Ray's dismay, the staff at the center not only told him what he could and could not eat, but also what it was appropriate to wear to the center. Ray explained that he not a fan of long pants, since having his knees covered felt somewhat stifling for him, and he seldom wore them at home. However, after he had worn them to the center for his first few visits, one of the staff members asked him to stop doing so from then on. Ray never got an explanation for why shorts were ill suited for the center, only that they were.

Ray's other main complaint about the center resembled his misgivings about his apartment residence; the clients at the ADHC spoke mainly Asian languages, so that Ray again felt as though the possibilities for social interaction were severely limited. There was, however, one aspect of the center's curtailed communications that Ray was somewhat pleased with: since it was common knowledge at the center that he was gay, any English-speaking female clientele looking for companionship tended to leave him be. It was only after Ray had suffered a stroke during my fieldwork that he was finally told that it was all right if he stopped going to the health center. The stroke had caused verbal aphasia, so that Ray had to pay regular visits to another rehabilitation clinic to try to recover his speech. While he was not especially enamored with the rehab schedule, Ray did prefer these new one-on-one sessions to the regular visits to the "dungeon".

Family: Abridged Ties, Low Expectations

By the time I knew him, Ray had long since left behind the notion of cultivating close relations with blood kin. He had set out on his own to work as a writer and actor in his early twenties, and had gradually become used to being away from his Los Angeles-based family. As an older man, he had few reasons to alter his expectations for maintaining these bonds. Ray's parents were now deceased, and though he had little to say about them in our interviews, multiple photographs of them displayed in his apartment suggested that he retained connections to them.

Ray did express some misgivings, however, about his father's extended absences when he and two younger brothers were just small children. His dad had been out of work during the early 1930s economic depression, just after his sons were born. He was eventually fortunate enough to pick up work with a state-sponsored conservation outfit, where he learned a great deal about the natural environment, and developed a real passion for the job. Ray recalled that his father would often wonder aloud why his sons didn't also share his interests. This memory remained irksome to Ray decades later, since, to him, there was no secret as to why they didn't share their father's zeal for nature: his lengthy absences from family made it nearly impossible for them to learn anything about what he knew, let alone knowing the man himself.

Ray's youngest brother, John, lived nearby in the Bay Area, and they occasionally spoke on the telephone; much less frequently, the brothers got together in person. John was fairly wealthy, as he had made out quite well as a real estate developer. Not long before my research began, he had settled into retirement to what Ray termed his East Bay "empire on a hill". Although the brothers had followed fairly different life paths, their relationship was friendly, and John was generous enough to treat his brother on occasion. He took Ray out for lunch with other family living locally on New Year's Day, and on Ray's birthday, and he sometimes offered Ray complementary tickets to a baseball games in Oakland.

However, the two brothers almost never visited one another at their respective homes, and did not seem to keep close track of each other's welfare.

Ray's middle brother, Ken, was still in Los Angeles, but had two children living in the Bay Area. Ray's niece was often in touch by phone, but her job as a registered nurse in Marin County kept her too busy to come into San Francisco with any frequency. Ray did maintain an ongoing relationship with his city-dwelling nephew, Michael, who worked in software development, and was roughly 25 years Ray's junior. Michael was cognizant of the fact that there were gaps in the formal care Ray received, and he would sometimes come by to fill those gaps. Though his visits were irregular, Michael aimed to assist Ray in the evenings after his own workday was complete. Ray was fond of Michael, but still found it both hard to rely on his assistance, and difficult to get to a point where their interaction was smooth and easy. Ray knew that Michael had a hectic workweek, but he believed that uneasiness in their relations was due in part to misgivings Michael's wife expressed about the visits to his uncle's apartment. As Ray put it plainly, "She doesn't like him coming here". Ray read this as a homophobic reaction on the part of Michael's wife, but conceded that there was more to it than this. According to Ray, Michael abused cocaine, and it appeared that his wife was trying to monitor more than just his visits to Ray's apartment in an attempt to rein in his drug problem.

I did not ever meet Michael, but spoke with him on the telephone more than once from Ray's apartment. On these occasions, Michael sounded both guilty, for

not being there himself, and grateful, that I had been able to visit Ray in his stead. In fact, I did not provide Ray with much assistance in my visits, though he intimated more than once that he would be willing to pay me to do so. I did spend considerable time trying to help Ray with a desktop computer that he had in his apartment. Specifically, Ray a lot of trouble with viruses that infected his machine through a broadband connection, and I worked at getting rid of them when I could. On top of being a Sisyphean task - Ray came to the idea of anti-virus software rather late - this assistance was also fairly awkward, since there were always multiple pornographic images on the screen of the computer when I arrived to take a look. Ray had told me in our interviews that he would spend time looking at pornography, so he was not especially sheepish about the fact that I was faced with the images. However, he was adamant that he had not intended to download the pictures that were more graphic, or that involved younger participants, but that these had proliferated against his will. In the end, the uneasiness of being confronted with the images paled in comparison to the headaches of the computer viruses themselves, which never did seem to go away completely.

Filling Voids

As a younger man, Ray had distinguished himself by his accomplishments in acting and writing. Acting came first, and he had worked in his 30s and 40s in major productions in both New York City and Los Angeles. In fact, though his was a minor role, he appeared in the original Broadway production of *Oliver!,* in 1963.

By his late forties, he had also moved into the writing profession, and would end up publishing a whopping 92 books before his neuropathy made it too difficult to type with any efficiency in his late sixties. By and large, Ray wrote gothic romance mysteries, always under one of a variety of female pseudonyms. Ray concealed his name and almost never had an overtly gay theme in his novels since, as he put it, "Things were still pretty 'squeaky clean' at the time". He would, however, often have strong female protagonists in his novels; according to Ray, this let him "deal with a need to express desire for men in an acceptable way". I was taken aback when I first learned of his prodigious corpus of work, but Ray didn't seem especially proud of all the success. He explained that much of the writing had been formulaic, and that, in fact, it eventually became so easy for him to write that he could do so while completely drunk, or under the influence of recreational drugs. He could recall one occasion where he been holed up in a hotel room without his typewriter, his mind racing from the ingestion of amphetamines, when he wrote out a chapter of a book on a paper bathmat from his room. "A couple of the books," he admitted, "I barely remember writing at all, because I was always on speed when I wrote."

Ray eventually enrolled in Alcoholics Anonymous in the early 1980s, and was able to successfully break his habits so that they did not plague him by the time I met him as an old man. Looking back, Ray thought that it was evident that he had used his writing as an excuse to drink, and to abuse drugs. Moreover, Ray believed

that his substance abuse stemmed, in part, from a void of true intimacy in his life. Ray had two long-term relationships as a young adult, both lasting for about seven years. Still, in the gap between these relationships, and in the many solitary moments that arose around other short-term romances, Ray would drink heavily: "When I wasn't with someone, I was constantly looking [for someone], and that's when I'd go off [to drink], 'cause there wasn't anybody." As an older man, he was angry about having continued along the same path for so long. He was angry with himself, in part, but he was also angry at the particular ethos that had helped to shape him.

"The thing I dislike about gay life," Ray put it succinctly, "is that it's always predicated on sex." "You look at straight guys, and it's different: if you break up with your gal, it's not that easy. There's more…it's complicated. For us [gay men] it's always, there you go [motions toward the door]." As mentioned already, Ray often deliberately excluded himself from gay social spaces such as bars and bathhouses because he was uncomfortable with the scene. He has, in his own words, "never been like that". Still, sometimes this tendency to steer clear of hypersexualized spaces would only exacerbate his longing for intimacy. In the end, he participated in many relationships that failed to satisfy his needs beyond sexual satisfaction. By his seventies, when I met him, Ray felt that he had been cheated of this kind of companionship in his life, precisely because of a pervasive acceptance of sexuality as a focal point for the lives and relationships of gay men.

Much to Ray's chagrin, growing older had not made it any easier to find platonic love. In fact, he found it ever more apparent that, as a gay man, he was stuck with the "dumb way of thinking" that equates intimacy with sexual interest. In part, as he aged, he believed this distance was the product of a generation gap: "Places like the Castro are just a young people's scene. Not many from [LGBT seniors' group] go there, and I don't like it. It's hard to meet people, since everybody is looking at the young bodies!" Within his own cohort of men, Ray had raised his expectations that this distance from some of the more public performances of gay sexuality would make it easier to devote time to developing friendships, and more enduring forms of companionship. However, he found that persisting assumptions about the sexually laden nature of gay identity made this a particularly pointless pursuit. Men at the lunch meetings we attended were always joking about their healthy libidos, and it was fairly common for someone to report about a recent sexual conquest in the roundtable check-in. It was not as though Ray didn't like to laugh, either; he was known for a crackling sense of humour, and he enjoyed kidding around at the meetings. At the same time, Ray was weary of the fact that this repartee was the guaranteed constant in such a public space. There wasn't much in it for him any longer.

Ray's frustrations extended beyond gay social circles, to how he felt older gay men were perceived in the dominant heteronormative culture. "The general public doesn't realize, you know, that it's not always sexually-related. If they see you

standing you standing with someone on the corner, someone younger…well, it's sexual, then [in the eyes of passersby]. It's what's kept a lot of gay older people apart from larger society, staying single. There's a really low understanding of seniors' lives in the general public." Ray longed for companionship, both with younger people, as well as with someone he could share his days with in a long-term, coupled relationship. Younger adults offered "vitality", according to Ray, and again, he expected he might connect more easily with younger individuals as he aged. Where he saw opportunity for companionship, however, he found that the "general public" could only see a predatory old man, looking for some form of conquest.

Ray had, at one point, been involved with an organization that had as its primary purpose to link young and old. He enjoyed certain elements of the experience, but explained that it had not worked out the way he had anticipated. In his case, the younger couple he was matched with was ostensibly meant to stand in to provide the adult companionship one might expect from a son or daughter. Unfortunately, as it turned out, the encounters made Ray feel rather ancient. His matches were in their late twenties, and the 45-odd of years of difference made him feel like "Old Grandpa Ray". The irony of the intervention is clear; instead of adding youth and energy into his life, Ray's younger acquaintances actually made him feel older.

Clarity of Purpose: Ray's Quest as Anomaly

Relative to the men featured in earlier chapters, Ray was very explicit about his desire to develop intimate, personal relationships as he grew older. Where many of the study's men shied away from the messiness of love and other forms of intimacy in their later years, Ray believed that only this form of connection would fulfill him. Of course, given the centrality of romantic relationships in contemporary society, it seems somewhat foolhardy to demand an explanation for why one man should feel this way. Isn't Ray pursuing just the very same source of deeper meaning that most of us do when we reach out, express our affections, or just keep in touch? I believe that he is, although perhaps his longing for *companionship* above all else puts a wrinkle on the normative visage. Curiously, Ray never conveyed what it was that he expected to share with a close companion. Though it would seem that he held considerable knowledge, especially regarding a writer's craft, Ray never spoke of wanting to give someone else a glimpse of what had made him tick as a writer. He had spent a few years learning a spiritual philosophy that he likened to scientology, and he once wondered aloud whether he was meant to share this accumulated knowledge with others. Really, though, it appeared as though Ray sought out companionship for it's own sake. Indeed, he wanted it so badly precisely because he did not know what it was like.

Upon cursory inspection, Ray's quotidian life as an older man was not appreciably different from the lives of the other individuals I've written about here.

None of the other men had a disability like Ray's, but many of them were hampered in their mobility in some way. All of the men spent a great deal of time alone, even if they were in the study's minority that did not actually live alone. Though Stanley claimed to have "always had younger friends", everyone represented in these pages had the vast majority of their social interactions with other older people. Many of them resented this aspect of their lives. However, only Ray plainly and explicitly talked about a desire to "get involved" with someone. It is, of course, possible that many of the men would have jumped at the chance to have a companion, especially if this scenario came with a magical guarantee of minimal disruption to their lives. One need look no further than the general welcoming reception of my intrusion into their lives to ascertain this possibility. The difference is that Ray talked about seeking companionship, and included such a search in the narration of his aging self.

I believe that Ray performed old age slightly differently, emphasizing his hope for intimacy, partly because he was secure in other aspects of his identity. As detailed above, Ray had managed to carry out an accomplished career. He had success as an actor, and was a published author many times over. He did not have to concern himself with publicly establishing his status as a social agent of some worth, since his body of work took care of this. In a sense, his accomplishments in this domain of life were solid enough that he could afford to forget them. For the most part, Ray struck an attitude of indifference about his creative achievements.

His books were in the past, and he did not have much of a need to revisit them. Under these circumstances, with his work goals behind him, Ray could very clearly see what was missing from a fulfilling life: intimacy. It is true that he might have been more determined to seek this out through family channels. As we have seen, several of the study's men remained focused on finding solace by fixing bonds of kinship. Yet Ray had learned to expect little from his blood family, and he knew very well what these interactions were liable to be like. He was resigned to limited intimacy with family, but he couldn't see why he should feel the same about platonic love with someone he himself had chosen. It appeared to Ray as though he'd gotten a raw deal when it came to companionship, and he wasn't quite willing to let it be.

Ethnographer as Suitable Companion?

As expressed in the previous chapter, with George I occasionally found my relationship approaching an ambiguous grey zone: at times it seemed I was serving as a stand-in for the spiritual student that George sought out. Here, with Ray, the question comes up again. After getting to know Ray, and spending considerable time at his apartment, was I beginning to take on the role of the younger companion? Because Ray was looking for a fairly intense relationship, and it was clear that this was never going to be the arrangement for the two of us, the answer here is less equivocal: I was not. It is true that Ray was comfortable calling me to

go out for a meal, and that he once invited my wife, Nicole, as well. We were friendly enough that we attended two baseball games together, and once a public lecture at a historical society located near Ray's apartment. Yet, in his quest for companionship, Ray was looking for a closeness that went far beyond the occasional visit or outing, leaving my role as researcher clearly intact.

What was slightly awkward was that Ray occasionally intimated that he was interested in paying me to help him get through evenings. When we spoke about how he struggled with basic tasks in the kitchen, Ray steered the conversation to my own availability on more than one occasion. He never did ask me explicitly whether I was interested in a job, but on one occasion he did inquire about my hours and wages at my job at a local university not long after we discussed his evening difficulties. I would have had to reject his offer had it ever been made, and Ray knew this from my reactions to his queries. Ultimately, the fact that he was considering me for a paid care-giving position, while flattering, also suggests that he felt there was enough distance between us that he would not have expected me to do the work for free.

Embodied Ambivalence

The gradual breakdown of the body is central challenge for aging individuals, and it is also a primary social marker for aging (Calasanti & King, 2007).[52] For many scholars, this bodily experience serves as a governor of sorts on interpretations

disposed to a postmodernist reading of the "constructed" quality of aging. Biggs (1999, p.6), for instance, argues that one can only speak of a limited sort of freedom even as we dispense with strict chronological age categories, as bodily decay still cannot be reversed.[53] Escaping one's own body, even if only momentarily, is an unquestionably difficult task. However, we have seen in these pages that one should not underestimate an individuals' intent on arriving at a more palatable late life narrative. Walter enacts quite an unlikely storyline as he considers grand-fatherhood, and George gives us a glimpse of his utopian vision to index the possibility of human salvation. Their faltering bodies remain, of course, as the visions are but momentary suspensions of stronger narratives. In Ray's case, the notion of transcending the body seems ludicrous.

Ray's body was very nearly a major character in its own right in his late life narrative. Despite the fact that his muscles and limbs were in an obvious state of atrophy, there was no denying Ray's corporeal presence: he was well over 250 pounds. His body not only interrupted his days, but it announced its presence to others to such an extent that it was an object of concern, medically speaking. An obese man with many related health problems, Ray found that, at the health center, the pleasure he was used to deriving from his considerable appetite was now greatly restricted. He resented this surveillance, and he was not about to let this be

[52] Also see (Katz, 1996, Ch. 1) on the historical emergence of the medicalized aging body.

the final word about his bodily functions. At the LGBT lunch meetings we attended, some men and women were careful to save some of their meals, so that they could have a snack at home. In particular, on occasions when extra meals were made available, most of those who accepted seconds put them away for later. In contrast, Ray always consumed the meal provided with gusto, and would gladly accept any additional fare, and eat it immediately. This tendency to excessive consumption sometimes took on an element of the grotesque, in which Ray's friend Gene played a prominent role. Gene was one of the attendees who took great satisfaction in acting as a volunteer at the lunches, and he commonly kept track of the extra meals available. In so doing, Gene also paid particular attention to serving Ray, and would routinely funnel stray desserts his way. In effect, the resulting scene enacted a horribly perfect match of Ray's desire to consume, and Gene's desire to provide.

By reversing his dietary restrictions Ray effectively, if temporarily, thumbed his nose at the medical surveillance he resented. However, Ray had also devised another way of wringing positive meaning from his compromised bodily state. Even as Ray felt he had been badly betrayed by his body in late life, his only vision of an enduring legacy beyond death derived squarely from this same biologically constituted self. It turns out that Ray was determined to put this corpulence to good use, and he had found a more permanent way to extract some modicum of value

[53] Also see (Lamb, 2000, p.10), who suggests that the emphasis on the body provides some stability amidst the shifting ground of postmodernist theorizing.

from his body: Ray mentioned to me on several occasions that he intended to donate his body to science. His niece, who had pursued a career in nursing, had confirmed for Ray that medical schools were always in need of bodies for training new students; Ray was also convinced that his skin, considerable as it was, would be fairly valuable for victims of burn and other such accidents. When I pressed him to explain the appeal to making such a gift, Ray would mostly shrug and offer that it came from his own practical nature. In fact, he couldn't understand why people would ever choose to have themselves interred, or cremated, when there was a clear need for bio-substances that remained after physical death. When we spoke about mortality, his concern was primarily with what is often called "dying with dignity", rather than with death *per se*. He had been there in his father's last days as an inpatient at a VA hospital in the Bay Area, and had been dismayed by the fact that his medical care kept him both alive and in a near-constant state of bodily stress. As Ray saw it, regulations such as a restriction on cigarette smoking, while well-intentioned, had the effect of keeping his father in "perfect agony" in the months before he died. The son wanted nothing more than to avoid this kind of ending, but he could already see similarities through his experience being treated as a "case" in his outpatient care.

Ray's decision to pass on his body and its parts never did, in itself, seem especially odd to me. What is curious, I think, is that Ray chose to emphasize this specific generative mode, when he clearly had other options. He expressed

indifference when I asked what would become of his written oeuvre, and this lack of concern extended to the fate of several partial manuscripts that had been left unpublished. It is not as though Ray had completely foregone making arrangements for his works, as he had already entrusted the rights to his books to a niece involved in the business world in Los Angeles. However, he maintained an overall lack of concern for their fate, suggesting to me at one point that "she can do what she wants with them." Perhaps he just could not see where his books could make an impact in the future. Even if the recipient of his bodily gift could only be vaguely defined, he could be fairly sure that he would help extend and preserve life with the gesture.

Conclusion: (Un)Happy Medium?

In several senses, Ray's old age stands out when compared to the senescence of men introduced in earlier chapters. He was not especially concerned with mending family ties, or figuring out just how he fit on a kinship schematic. He did not show much interest in helping out others, or in establishing a certain kind of status by means of giving gifts. Nor did he speak of improbable scenarios as part of his desired late life, in order to help refigure his identity. Although there were many aspects of life that frustrated Ray, he was a rather grounded individual. As we have seen with regard to his own death, his thinking was more practical than it was dramatic, and it connoted a certain composure. Perhaps because he had gotten

beyond a need to question his own social identity, Ray was somewhat more "settled" in late life than were some of the other men. Clearly, however, despite his equanimity regarding personal status and achievement, Ray was not quite lucky enough to have reached a happy medium.

For in another crucial respect, Ray's late life performance betrays the fact that fulfillment was even further away for him than it was for the other men. Ray could not accept the fact that his old age was devoid of close companionship. Content with much of his life story, he felt shortchanged about the fact that true companionship had always fallen beyond his reach. He blamed a dominant discourse about gay men for setting limits on his personal life, and sometimes blamed himself for having been unable to break out of its mould. It is clear from Ray's comments about his writing life that he felt enormous pressure while operating in the "squeaky clean" heteronormative world to find ways to contain *any* of his homo-inclined-self, be it sexually or merely socially rendered. As he explained, he "sublimated" with his gothic romances, but this could hardly have been easy or fully satisfying. Somewhat ironically, his aversion to predominantly gay social scenes was due to just the opposite problem: there was *too much* sexual openness, and he could never find a home within such an ethos. As an older man, Ray found that little had changed so that he could realize new experiences, except that his body had drawn him into another powerful discursive formation: Ray found himself increasingly enclosed within medically-oriented spaces, where, sometimes

by sheer demographic accident, he was doubly blocked from finding the fulfillment he so desired.

Ray had considerable expectations for late life, and he found that it was failing to live up to its promises. His disappointment would surely have been alleviated some if his body had held up better. He would have been better able to avoid all the time spent in the "dungeon", within a social circle that he experienced as utterly foreign. However, Ray's impediments went well beyond medicalized social space. The old age he sought was also hampered in spaces he found to be all too familiar, like the LGBT seniors group. On the surface, it would seem that all of this enclosure and constraint can be traced right back to Ray himself: people were either too much like him, or too much unlike him, but the constant was a dissatisfied and unfulfilled ego. I believe that this reading both has truth to it, and ultimately, that it also has no merit.

It is true that Ray was constrained by who he was, and (perhaps more importantly) who he had been. He was a gay man, who had participated in, and been expected to participate in, forms of intimacy that seemed rather narrowly conceived, as he grew older. He was a man who focused on developing an admirable life of creative production, knowing that his blood family was not willing or able to bring him satisfaction and joy. However, the dichotomy offered above, where others are disappointingly either like or unlike him, does a grave disservice to Ray, both to his tastes, and to his identity. Yes, Ray identified as a gay senior,

and in that sense he was in the right place for the LGBT lunch group, or to visit the Castro district, for that matter. However, Ray expresses quite plainly that he (would like to) divorce himself from the sociality he finds in these spaces. Remember: he says, "I have never been like that." As for the places where he feels like an outsider, the "dungeon", and his apartment building, it is also too easy to say that Ray is simply "unlike" those he interacts with. He is not able to communicate, which effectively ends any chance of finding a companion. But this is actually somewhat of a technical issue: it is impossible to know if Ray is "like", or would "like", others there; all that can really be said is that he is unable to know.

In a recent article that considers the dynamics of "aging identity", Biggs points out one of the central ironies of later life: "…that a withdrawal of psychological inhibition and an increase in social restriction are experienced simultaneously by many mature adults" (2003, p.154). Ray's old age seems to have been touched by just such a dramatic effect. He was ready, as an old man, to experiment with new forms of relatedness. He had worked, with respect to his substance abuse, to arrive at a new place from which to appreciate his later years. Yet he found his life regulated in ways that made his boundedness to a wheelchair to seem like the least of his confinements. It is no wonder that he chose to careen wildly through the streets.

Conclusion - Unsettled Confidence

Opening: The Big Picture in Old Age

In *Elders Living Alone*, Rubinstein and his colleagues suggest that, for older adults, the "big picture" has often already been "painted in" (1992, p.145). The intention of the book's authors is to indicate ways that frail seniors manage nevertheless to wrest a certain kind of freedom from newly circumscribed lives. They find that the men and women in their study employ various strategies to preserve semblances of their lifelong identities as they confront significant changes in old age. This dissertation similarly demonstrates that, for childless men facing great challenges in senescence, resignation is an uncommon sentiment. However, the intention here has been to emphasize the emergence of specific quests and desires in late life, beyond simple reactions to changing life circumstances.

The stories rendered in the preceding chapters show that much remains "unsettled" for the study's older men, and they are all in some way struggling to assemble and arrange key elements to produce a favourable composition for late life. The men fulfill this task in a variety of ways, and it is not always certain that success is within reach. What is clear, however, is that they are all still considering weighty questions, and thus very much active with respect to the "big picture" of their lives.

Obstacles to Fulfillment for Childless Men

Early social science literature on childlessness began with the assumption that, for older childless men and women, impediments to a fulfilling senescence were likely to be a direct result of never having had children. When such an approach is used, childlessness itself becomes a "social problem". Following other current scholars, I steer my research away from such bias as a founding premise, seeking a more balanced exploration of childless men's lives. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the dissertation focuses on forms of "fulfillment", the preceding pages indicate that the study's men experience varied and abundant frustrations in their later years.

For the men profiled above, obstacles to finding fulfillment derive from two separate, but overlapping, sources: (1) *socio-physical environments* the men inhabit on a daily basis, and (2) *embodied histories* that derive from the personal and cultural experiences of these same men. As an illustration of (1), we have seen that William is repeatedly thwarted in his attempt to share his aesthetic tastes with others, largely because the senior center he frequents is an unreliable venue for showing his favourite films. He tried to drum up interest in using his home as an alternate viewing site. However, even had he been able to build the momentum to persuade others to follow him, his tiny SRO room would have been a difficult place to gather. The places where he spends time, and he where gathers with others, tend

to offer insufficient stages for achieving William's late life goals. George also finds the senior centers to be inadequate, but for different reasons. He would love to have a forum to express his passion about spiritual matters, but at the centers he rarely finds the kind of openness to learning he needs to effectively transmit his message. George believes that things would be different if he had more contact with younger people, and the age segregation common to senior service facilities is perceived to be a central problem by several men. Ray would also like to meet younger men, though he has no real interest in passing on his values. He seeks companionship, but regularly finds himself in social spaces that deny him an opportunity to build the kind of relationship he wants. Because of his faltering body, he is required to visit a health care facility on a near daily basis, where the prevailing ethos of surveillance has the dehumanizing effect of making him feel like a medical "case". Ray's desire to find new forms of interpersonal encounter is further quelled by his inability to communicate with the many speakers of Asian languages, both at the center, and in the building where he resides.

Ray can and does communicate with the attendees at the LGBT lunches he attends, however, but he still finds these gatherings to be ill suited for initiating a platonic relationship. Here we find an explicit instance where a current *socio-physical environment* intersects as a source of frustration with the second broad category, *embodied history*. Ray finds that he cannot satisfy his interests at the LGBT lunches because the predominantly sexualized mode of friendly interaction

is at cross-purposes with his quest. Ray is used to this form of sociality, but he has never been especially comfortable with it. In fact, he believes that its prevalence in many gay social arenas has made it difficult for him over the years to have even considered other forms of intimacy as viable alternatives. In Ray's case it is both the sites he now inhabits, as well a longstanding personal uneasiness with a specific cultural form, that produce moments of frustration in later life. Walter also carries with him a tension that has built up gradually through his adult life, and it continues to trouble him as an older man. He cannot shake the sense that he will always be his mother's "remittance man", and thus believes his fate is to continue make up for debt he accrued to her. This source of frustration appears to be rather personal, and perhaps it is relative those experienced by men like Ray. However, Walter's anxieties must also be seen within a much broader cultural lens; namely, the particularly American notion that it is shameful to be dependent on others into adulthood (Rubinstein, et al., 1992, p.146). It is due, in part, to the heavy moral valence of this narrative that Walter is bound to consider himself a failure, and that many of the study's men deliberately avoid imposing themselves on others even as they reach out to secure a meaningful senescence.

Reaching Out without Connecting?

In the course of documenting my research participants' efforts to "settle" life narratives, I noted on several occasions the men's ambivalence about getting involved with others. This is evident in the case of George, who tends to recede to his solitary spiritualism, rather than allowing himself to explore potentially charged emotional relationships. William, too, withdraws prematurely from sites of social exchange, and strictly avoids having any of his gift-giving reciprocated. A certain wariness is even visible where affable Stanley is concerned, as he refrains from letting others at the lunch group into his personal affairs. By marking these examples, I do not suggest that the men eschew most forms of social contact. On the contrary, each of the men makes a concerted effort most days to join others regularly at local senior centers. Instead, the point of highlighting such ambivalence is to show that what occupies these older men who are childless, and often living alone, is not always what one might expect. Of the five men profiled, it is only Ray who is committed to searching for a companion, while the others forego chances to deepen social bonds to develop other, more pressing, scripts.

Due, in part, to the legacy of "deficit" approaches to childlessness, and to old age in general, there remains even in today's more critical literature a tendency to conflate "social connection" with a meaningful old age. Isolated seniors, in particular, are taken to mainly need such "social connection" to re-introduce a semblance of a life worth living. As I've noted at various points in the study, this

narrative can be helpful, and it builds on abundant evidence linking social participation with well being in old age. However, the simplicity of the framework can also simultaneously produce an unfounded confidence about what matters most to older people. This, I submit, creates a worrisome blind spot.

The men in the current study are not extremely isolated, nor are they homebound. At minimum, they all routinely interact with other seniors in their visits to senior centers. Nevertheless, they spend a great deal of time alone, and a majority of them live alone without much contact with family. Yet the sense I got from most of them was that the pursuit of social connection, while desirable in some form, was often of secondary importance to something larger in their lives. I cannot readily establish whether a life as a non-parent had something definitive to do with this stance. In his book on older men living alone, Rubinstein (1986) indicates that his "never-married" men were fiercely protective of their independence in late life. He considers heightened "fear of dependency" as an explanation for why social contacts remain peripheral for many of these men, and also entertains the possibility that these men withdraw to avoid "spending too much time in an undesired environment" (Rubinstein, 1986, p.213).

Highlighting evidence of social withdrawal in late life immediately calls to mind one of the more maligned theories in social gerontology's past, known as "disengagement" theory. First articulated in the early 1960s, scholars postulated that as a person ages, "…a mutual withdrawal occurs on the part of the aging

person and others in his or her social system" (Lamb, 2000, p.142). More than simply marking a beneficial way to face the world in late life, "disengagement" also purported to help older men and women secure the freedom to die with a modicum of grace. Katz traces the historical trajectory of competing paradigms in social gerontology, indicating that "disengagement" theory fell into disrepute at a certain point in the 1970s, inextricably tied as it was to visions of aging centered on concepts such "dependency" and "decline" (1996, p.121-23).[54]

More recently, Lamb has argued that the flight from "disengagement" theory should, in part, be seen as a by-product of a general American wariness about the possibility of significant change in old age. Her book about aging in West Bengal documents a strong impulse on the part of older men and women to sever the bonds that they have accumulated in the course of their long lives – to cut the ties of *Maya* (Lamb, 2000). This is far from a simple process, and Lamb shows that it is manifest quite differently across class, as well as between men and women. However, it is an ideal that is taken quite seriously by all, as it is has an unquestioned bearing on the possibility of dying well. In contradistinction to such bold self-examination in old age, Lamb notes that "success" in late life in America commonly "…entails, ideally, no new changes or characteristics at all." She asserts that in both lay American society and in the U.S. academe, a "permanent persons" theory prevails, where noticeable movement away from the core traits of a

[54] See also (Katz, 2000, p.138).

younger, adult self is read as so much failure for older individuals. Working in conjunction with myriad products sold to stave off aging, Lamb believes that fear and rejection of change in America end up reinforcing non- or anti-aging as a dominant cultural script (2000, p. 142-43).

A parallel between Lamb's findings and my own is perhaps only faintly visible, but I do believe that it exists. The men in this study do not speak explicitly of pulling away from intimates in late life; in fact, most do not have such an option, as they have very few close relations to begin with. However, as already noted, several of the men do refrain from cultivating connections that have the potential to grow into friendships, or even more committed relationships. This abridgment stops short of wholesale "disengagement", as I document a common urge for the men to take on the role of "giver", or "helper" in late life. Again, however, the men would often assume such positions with a degree of ambivalence; reaching out to others worked only so long as others could temper the urge to reach back to any great extent.

Beyond this cross-cultural correspondence, evidence from the United States may help illuminate findings such as my own by delving deeper into the psycho-dynamics that underlie movements to withdraw from social interaction in late life. Research has begun to demonstrate the "potential costs" of social contact for senior citizens, suggesting that there may well be a more global application for the tendency to seek distance from others in late life. Psychologist Laura Carstenen is

concerned about the widespread tendency to embrace the notion that social involvement is an unmitigated good for seniors, and she has developed the foundations of a theory of "socioemotional selectivity" for older individuals to help to explain why (Carstenen, 2001). She argues that many seniors have finely tuned senses of the emotional effects of social interaction, and that they make judicious decisions to help maintain positive affect in their lives. The author proposes that many aging individuals are intent on protecting a carefully narrated sense of self, and are all too cognizant of the risks of social contact: "…in old age fewer people can help preserve our self-concepts, and careful discriminations among potential social partners becomes necessary to minimize interactions that actively erode self-concept. Many social partners will not share sufficient history to verify identity; other social partners will behave in stereotypical and demeaning ways in response to the stimulus of old age" (Carstenen, 2001, p. 271).

Carstenen is careful to point out that social contact is not equivalent to social support, and that this line of inquiry does not lend credence to the view that older people are just fine confronting old age on their own. Instead, the research indicates possible reasons why men like those in my own study were visibly cautious in considerations of reaching out to bond with others. Men like William and like George have a great deal invested in the self-understandings to which they attach themselves. For William, it is vital that he maintain the sense that he is culturally refined, and belongs to an *intelligensia*. George believes strongly that he

has left the illusions of the material world behind, and is the better for it. Truly opening themselves up to others may not only be a practically challenging feat for these men, but may also jeopardize the ongoing cultivation of these narratives.

Identities of Some Consequence

The search for appropriate rationale to explain why the men impose limits on exchange relations has pushed this concluding analysis towards a focus on negative consequences. However, the material presented in the substantive chapters here also suggests that the study's men were after something other than intimacy in a more active, positive sense. Though theirs were not always self-conscious efforts, the men show many signs of being busy with care-taking work for their own reputations. "Fulfilling" aging, for these men, meant showing a concern for personal standing, and extending oneself to secure consistency in valued narratives about the self. Carrying out such a task was paramount to these men, to the extent that it played a major role in constituting how fulfillment itself was perceived. Through their words and deeds, the men pursued identification with accepted and respected social roles; the following positions were sought after: benefactor, aesthete, family man, spiritual mentor, good friend, and even nurturing mother.

Some men sought to extend roles that they had been trying to play throughout adulthood, but it is clear that others were casting themselves for performances that

were new in old age. I deliberately focused on the day-to-day concerns of men's lives, as well as on how they oriented themselves towards the end of life. In so doing, I intend to help to reverse a longstanding tendency in qualitative aging research, where narratives of the past stand in as the pre-eminent form of "meaning-making" for old men and women. This tendency to mine the past persists, despite the fact that Vesperi diagnosed it as a disciplinary malady more than two decades ago. In *City of Green Benches*, the author succinctly addressed a variety of negative implications resulting from our culture's view of the elderly as "estranged from the future and even the ongoing present", and delineated social gerontology's complicity in engendering the sort of alienation such an attitude produces (Vesperi, 1985, p.13).[55] However, unpacking the relationship between the desiring selves of late life, on the one hand, and the accumulated selves of lifelong experience is an exceedingly difficult endeavour. This is especially true when, as in my case, the understanding of a man's past is based primarily on his own retrospective accounts.

It is necessary to acknowledge that teasing out what exactly is "new" to late life is an enigmatic process. Yet, at the same time, it abundantly clear that much of what concerns the study's men, and much of what they desire, has, in fact, emerged in a new form in old age. In some instances, these preoccupations and longings change their shape set against the looming horizon of mortality. Social

[55] See also (Luborsky, 1993).

theorist Jerome Bruner points out that, while it may be common to act as though it were otherwise the case, the self is constantly being renewed: "Self-making though self-narrating is restless and endless…and despite self-assuring homilies about people never changing, they do. They rebalance their autonomy and commitments, usually in a way that honors what they were before (2002, p.84). The study's men do, I believe, perform just such a recalibration, and are ever wary of losing a sense of personal autonomy. And while honor is certainly at stake, perhaps these men buck Bruner's norm, disposed as they sometimes are to honoring a refigured past more than the past itself.

Tellingly, predominant views of aging and life course development often work to preclude insight into such renewals in self-making. Anne Basting rightly decries the stubborn persistence of the popular narrative that associates aging with decline; she summarizes, "…we reach the peak of our physical, emotional, intellectual development sometime in young adulthood. After this point, our actions are simply seen as…echoes or distillations of former, more flexible and vibrant youthful selves" (Basting, 1998, p.9). In the starkest cases, where the onset of dementia has taken effect, even these echoes are said to be barely available, and old age becomes equated with loss, plain and simple.[56]

[56] See (Ballenger, 2006) on the persistence of stigmatizing narratives as Alzheimer's disease becomes increasingly medicalized. As he and others in this volume point out, such discourses effectively cast aside the possibility of recognizing "new" selves among demented individuals.

The current text aims to take seriously the emergent quality of the men's lives it seeks to represent. The men's identities continue to unfold and develop in significant ways in late life; indeed, this becomes the central task of fulfilling aging. Using singular, chapter-long portraits, I have tried to home in on this process, focusing primarily at the scale of the individual actor. Such a format aspires to a textual rhythm permitting some development of character for the men, though it stops a ways short of a "novelistic" treatment such Myerhoff's landmark text, *Number Our Days* (1978). As it has done for many anthropological treatments of aging, Myerhoff's richly descriptive work served as an inspiration for my depictions here.[57] In the book for which she is best known, Myerhoff's portraits of older Jewish men and women are elaborated in the context of an exhaustive study of a particular place. My own research does not duplicate this sort of community study, but like Myerhoff, I develop extended profiles of my individual research participants while simultaneously drawing out the co-creative and idiosyncratic nature of ethnographic encounters.

Though it does not quite show in *Number our Days*, Myerhoff was at the forefront of her field in understanding the process and production of ethnography. Early on, she invoked the notion of the "third voice" as the appropriate form for ethnographic essay, where textual authority is vested in the collaboration between

[57] Outside of anthropology, the distinguished writings of scholars Ronald Blythe (Blythe, 1979) and Robert Coles (Coles, 1999) also exhibit a richness of detail with a similar capacity to lay bare

informant and interviewer, rather than one or the other (Kaminsky, 1992, p.7). I seek here to continue this tradition, and to perpetuate an anthropology that recognizes that such collaborative participation extends to the reader as well. My authorial treatment of the men's lives promotes a singular vision, of course, but I believe it also remains open to interpretive possibility. The dissertation invokes particular theoretical schemas to try to stimulate understanding, but, in this spirit of exploration and collaboration, it also deliberately stops short of enclosing the produced text within a generalized conceptual apparatus. Heeding John Law's entreaty in *After Method* (Law, 2004), I strive here to honour a responsibility to "situated enactments and sets of partial connections", rather than to general and universal truths.

Closing: A Touch of Humility

If new, desiring, selves are left out of the equation, matters are certainly much simpler for scholars studying the aging process. Even for those inclined to adopt a progressive view of aging, where the metaphor of decline is dropped, it is still common to retain the idea that older men and women carry desire and social identity forward with them from earlier life in some wholesale sense. Consider again the volunteerism ethos referenced in chapter 4, where academics and policy makers alike seek to harness the skills and aptitudes of today's seniors. The term

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the aging process. Their work was not a model for this dissertation, per se, but it did serve as a horizon for gauging possibilities for producing an evocative anthropological text.

most often employed to describe what older people have to offer is “experience”, interpreted as something accrued during productive lives. But is this calculus really so easy to figure?

In his seemingly unfailing compendium, *Keywords* (1976), Raymond Williams points out that there have been complex and significant shifts in usage for the term *experience*. He divides two emergent senses of the word from the late eighteenth century, referring to them as “experience past” and “experience present”. The former designates a conscious accumulation of knowledge from the past, while the latter denotes a particular kind of “consciousness”, often itself distinguished from reasoning. Williams indicates that the advent of the first sense, “experience past”, introduced an element of “confidence” in the past that had not been seen in prior usages, where one could fairly be sure to gain from the “lessons of experience.” The latter form, “experience present”, gradually developed to include a sense of subjective witness that offered the “most authentic kind of truths.” Williams (1976) acknowledges the radically different connotations of the two forms, but argues that they have “…in practice moved together, within a common historical situation”. It appears as though both senses of “experience” are now invoked to summon the undeniable value of “tapping into” today’s senior citizens. Older men and women have clearly witnessed many things in their long lives, and this is meant to confer irreplaceable, authentic, truths to be shared. Moreover, they are anointed as literal

embodiments of "experience past", inspiring confidence in the wisdom they have accumulated.

There are, of course, elements of this picture that are worth holding on to. There are clear advantages to recognizing that some seniors *do* have particular insight to share. What is troubling is what such a narrative tends to assume about older men and women as social agents. First, it positions them primarily as resources, and assumes that we can capitalize on the value of the resource because it has a distinctive window to the past embedded in it. This aspect of the picture is somewhat disturbing, but it is not really the element that is most troubling. Instead, what grates more is what is missing from the picture, rather than what is embedded in it. This is the possibility that new interests and desires in old age may not only just develop, but may well become paramount in old age. Indeed, it disregards the fact that older selves may also need to be jettisoned to allow those that are emergent to rise to the surface. In other words, the picture reproduces a confidence in the fact that there is continuity of desire and value through adulthood, and that the right intervention will make the best of this legible and available.[58] [59]

The late lives of Walter, Stanley, William, Ray, and George are unsettled. They seek ways to fulfill visions of old age that will offer them personal satisfaction,

[58] Lamb also makes note of a common apprehension in the U.S. around acknowledging any profound shifts in the perspectives of older adults (2000, p. 142).
[59] Tornstam's theory of *gerotranscendence* points to flaws in this widespread expectation for consistency of interests and values from mid- to late-adulthood (Tornstam, 2005).

and that help to keep alive, if not resolve, a variety of “big picture” questions that matter to them. Their stories, I believe, afford space for an unsettling humility, to replace some of the unwarranted confidence in prevailing understandings of old age.

Coda - Participant Death and Ethnographic Performance

Stanley's death caught me off guard, and not only because I hadn't seen it coming. He had been sick off-and-on in late 2004 and early 2005, but his tendency to play down his illness made it hard to believe that he had succumbed, in the end, to pneumonia. The timing of his death was especially disconcerting, for me, because I was utterly consumed with the pending birth of my daughter, Eva. In fact, I heard the news about Stanley on a voicemail message from a social worker we both knew on the very day Eva was born, March 4th, 2005, which, coincidentally, would have been Stanley's 80th birthday. He had passed away at home the day before. Stanley was extremely reluctant to seek medical attention for what ailed him - he would joke that he felt like "cash cow" in the hospital - and a delay in treatment may well have contributed to his death. I was taken aback upon hearing the news, and I felt the urge to do something; however, I knew that even if I had had more time there was nothing much to be done. Within a few days, I called Stanley's younger roommate, Bill, to express condolences. He sounded a little shaken up, and I said I would check in again soon.

Sometime in late March, nearly a month after Stanley's death, I called back the number at his apartment. Not only was there no answer when I called, but the

line had been disconnected. I figured that perhaps Bill (the roommate) had not paid the monthly fee, and I decided to stop by to see how things were.

Upon arriving I buzzed the apartment several times before a construction worker let me in to the building. He explained that they were busy working on the "old man's" apartment, and that there was nobody else there. He invited me up nonetheless, and when I reached Stanley's first floor apartment, it was plain to see that it had been completely emptied out: nearly a dozen bulging "garbage" bags sat outside in the hallway.

As it turned out, Bill had taken a few of his own things, and left the apartment for good. He had mentioned to me in our earlier conversation that the landlord was starting to give him trouble about his remaining there; he was neither on the lease, nor was he performing the managerial duties that Stanley had been so diligent about. It appears that Bill could see the writing on the wall, and that he could avoid some of the hassle of dealing with the landlord if he skipped out early.

I found the phone number for the landlord on a sign posted inside the building, and I decided to give him a call. After introducing myself as a friend of Stanley's, I asked about what had happened to his stuff. He informed me that much of it had been shipped over to Goodwill, and everything left over had been trashed. I may have projected an element of accusation or hostility, since his response was defensive: "Hey," he said, "I went and called his family, and they didn't want any of it. I didn't have to do that, but I did it out of respect. Anyway, what else was I

going to do with his stuff?" He went on to complain about the roommate, Bill, who apparently had abused his trust, and owed him a back payment on the rent.

I stood across the street staring at the front window of Stanley's old apartment after this conversation, experiencing a mild paralysis from all I had seen and learned that morning. Then, I turned away and got in the car to drive home.

When I first discovered that all of Stanley's stuff - all the evidence of meaningful relatedness and material extensions of Stanley - was just being sent to Goodwill by his landlord, I was somewhat shocked. But perhaps I needn't have been. Stanley would often chuckle when I quizzed him about the ultimate fate of his material possessions, and the stories that went with them. Shaking his head, he would usually counter with a rhetorical query of his own: "I'll be dead and gone, so what does it matter?" In the broader context of my study, Stanley was not alone in offering up this rejoinder; several of the men I interviewed uttered similar responses to my probes about leaving personal legacies.

Faced with this "commonsensical", and increasingly familiar, refrain, I tended to nod knowingly, and move on in an attempt to discern the men's "true" feelings about their values and valuables (i.e., I looked and listened for more positive displays of such concern). And, in a sense, I found them. These men wanted to tell and record certain stories; they were busy sorting and sometimes sending out their things; they often contributed to "worthy" causes; and sometimes they even shared visions - some realistic, other less so - about a securing a place in posterity. As a

result, I largely chalked up the dismissive statements - Stan's "I'll be dead and gone" - to feigned indifference. It did occur to me that they might provide insight into a discourse around mortality. Mostly, though, they seemed to be an obstacle to getting "the goods".

In the wake of witnessing the disposal of Stanley's stuff after his death, it occurred to me that there was more than mere foreclosure to the refrain I'd been hearing. Stanley was aware, I now think, that it wasn't worth worrying too much about the fate of his possessions or stories because regardless of where/with whom they ended up, there was a good chance that much of their significance would be stripped away after he died. Perhaps he knew this because he had seen it all happen before - many of his friends had died - perhaps he plainly understood his own situation. Perhaps Stanley had come to terms with the fundamental "ambivalence of aging" that Lamb encountered in West Bengal, where one simultaneously faces the intensity of life's accumulated meaning, as well as its "irrevocable transience" (2000, p.xi). Looking back over fieldnotes now, it is clear that the scene I witnessed would not have surprised him in the least. Zygmunt Bauman proposes that there is a profound absurdity enacted at death, one that is simply part of the human condition, whereby our projects/tasks to fix enduring meaning are doomed to remain incomplete, and unsuccessful (1992, p.5). Perhaps the disjuncture is even greater for a man like Stanley, whose aging self is largely disconnected from an historical self so vividly present in much of his material life.

Stanley's tendency to close off conversation about what happens after death appears to indicate that a concept such as "legacy"- centred as it is on continuities after death - was ill-suited as a tool to perceive the performance of aging that he was enacting. Stanley was not especially preoccupied with leaving things behind, or even leaving an impression that would endure beyond his death. He did, however, care deeply about making sense of his own life; mainly, this consisted of sorting out who it was that he felt "kinship" with, and engaging in practices that helped to confirm these connections. I believe that this still constitutes making a mark, but not one that is expected to carry the burden of a quest for immortality.

I originally considered Stanley's reluctance to elaborate on a "postself" as a kind of "refusal", one betrayed by his other efforts to articulate and commit to visions of himself in relation to others. It now reads as one important aspect of our encounter, one largely consistent with his overall performance of aging. I had been imposing a particular stage for this performance, one that involved a projection forward beyond death, and imputed unwarranted permanence to Stanley's possessions. Ironically, it seems to have taken the aftermath of his actual death to show me this.

Appendix A

1. **MY INTRO**

   Study of seniors in SF, different ways of thinking about what matters most in late life, particularly interested in seeing if having not had children makes an impact here.

2. **PRELIM**

   (a) Native San Franciscan? Family from?
   (b) Senior Centers? How often/What for?

3. **THE BASICS**

   (i) Age
   (ii) Citizenship
   (iii) Education
   (iv) Work? Or career before?
   (v) Married/ have/had a partner? More family history
   (vi) How do you support yourself? Monthly income? source?
   (vii) Where do you live? For how long?
   (viii) Who lives with you, if anyone?
   (ix) Hobbies? regular activities, making things? Writing? With whom?
   (x) Who do you see on a regular basis? For instance, in the last week?

4. **THE EXTRAS**

   (xii) Whom do you consider to be closest to you? Where are they? different from the past?
   (xiii) Commitments in current life. Severed commitments from past?
   (xiv) Life goals, now/then.
   (xv) Ideal life (family or individual that you know)? Why?
   (xvi) Decision to not have children, or by circumstance? Effects?
   (xvii) Thought much about/ experience with things passed on? Values? valuables? Any turning points? Actions or accomplishments you would most like people to remember you by?

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