

The Journey of Life: An Interview with Thomas Cole



*Thomas Cole '71 B.A. is a historian, author, professor of medical humanities, lay chaplain, and humanistic gerontologist. In his acclaimed book *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge, 1992), Cole examines how the West's ancient and medieval understandings of aging have been upended by a scientific worldview. In previous centuries, growing old was a spiritual mystery in the eternal order of life. Now, Cole points out, it is a scientific problem to be managed or solved. But a scientific orientation, no matter how valuable, offers no existential grasp of the journey of life. He says we need to recover a moral language that illuminates the experience of aging – its meanings, truths, and gifts.*

*Cole is director of the McGovern Center for Humanities and Ethics at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. He is co-editor of *The Oxford Book of Aging* (1994) and author or editor of a dozen books. He spoke with *Reflections* in August 2013.*

REFLECTIONS: *In *The Journey of Life*, you say aging is a “season in search of its purposes” in the secular-scientific West. That was 1992. Is the search still on?*

COLE: The search continues. The shift from a religious to a scientific way of thinking about aging is still the dominant movement in our time. Our pursuit of individual health and wealth intensifies the pathos of aging. The challenge is: with the collapse of collective meaning systems, how do we find a worldview that gives a meaning to getting old? I think we *are* in a cultural moment of surging interest in spiritual dimensions of aging – in academic life, in religious communities, in the arts and care of elders. But it's small compared to the privileging of youth and medicine, the tremendous fear of aging.

REFLECTIONS: *How do you reorient the discussion?*

COLE: We need more focus on the moral world of elders. That is, we basically agree that society has obligations to older people, but are older people ever asked to have obligations to society? A moral order requires mutual obligation. I think many older people would like to accept such a role and expectation. This is a moral issue we could discuss in our congregations, churches, and synagogues. But we don't talk about it. We are afraid.

REFLECTIONS: *Why the reluctance?*

COLE: Religious institutions have internalized the dominant values the rest of us have: everyone wants to stay middle-aged and not get any older. I think we need an interdenominational approach to research – Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and others – into our sacred texts and wisdom, and share our findings and engage people about the moral meaning of aging.

As it is now, we are thrown back on our own individual resources and families. And that's too much a burden for individuals to bear.

REFLECTIONS: *We're hearing more about the bioengineering possibilities of delaying or even overcoming old age. Is the dream of earthly immortality a worthy aim?*

COLE: It probably won't be long before most people live to be 100. We know the limit of the human life span is about 120 years. But there's no stopping the attitude that says, "With enough vitamin supplements and rest and exercise and research, we can beat this thing. We can beat aging." I don't know how successful it will be. Is it a worthy goal? I don't think so – not compared to the priority of climate change or the needs of the underprivileged.

REFLECTIONS: *In your work as an ethics consultant and lay chaplain, you've seen life and death up close. How is it that some people face old age with resilience and serenity, and others are shattered by it? Do particular inner resources make the difference?*

COLE: I think the answer is more psychological than theological. People do better who have loving relationships and spiritual resources and who were not damaged by too much childhood trauma. I recall what the Talmud says: a person who is a fool in youth is a fool in old age, and a person who is wise in youth is wise in old age. Perhaps. But there's not much room for spiritual development in that view.

I think we have to push against the idea that says learning and creativity are supposed to stop after a certain age. We have to try to grow morally and spiritually all the way to the end.

REFLECTIONS: *Are we making progress against ageism, the culture's prejudice against old age?*

COLE: We hear "60 is the new 40," but is that really progress against ageism? On the one hand, it suggests that we are overcoming the idea that your 60s means you're only good for the rocking chair. It grants the possibility that the 60s, and well past the 60s, is a time of strength and vitality. But it also implies that if you can't maintain your prowess and independence at any age, then your life is without value. That attitude prevails. And now, as Margaret Gullette has argued, there's a trend of middle ageism, which is reflected in today's economic patterns of midlife downsizing and hiring discrimination.

REFLECTIONS: *What would the world look like if it lifted its prejudices against age?*

COLE: For one thing, we'd nurture a moral and spiritual awakening among people 55 to 85, invite them to imagine new roles for themselves, with a new

sense of social obligation and opportunity. People would feel less pressured to live forever. They'd die better deaths. They'd be less willing to agree to aggressive end-of-life efforts that keep a person alive at all costs. I know so many stories of demented people with multi-system organ failure who are kept alive no matter what. Instead of trying to do everything possible out of fear or guilt or lack of preparation or family communication, we might consider the Buddhist idea of conscious aging and conscious dying. Aging is a passage. We should very consciously be there for it.

REFLECTIONS: *Your next book focuses on a more specific aging question – what it means to be an old man today.*

COLE: We tend to live a cultural script that stops in middle age. We don't know what script to follow. Men find it difficult. In a middle-class acquisitive culture, we're expected to accumulate power, wealth, and control. Then we retire, and we have to learn to give up control. We have to give up the imagined privileges we had as men. We typically have fewer relationships than women. That is, women cultivate relationships all their lives, while men tend not to make friends outside the workplace. So, getting older, we try to piece a script together if we can. This is where congregational life can help, offering texts and wisdom and the understanding that God loves us: we are valuable because we are, not because we do.

REFLECTIONS: *How do you prepare for this challenge in your own life?*

COLE: I look forward to the experience of getting older and learning what it means to be an old man. My fears haven't gone away. But I know there are moral and spiritual practices that help me deal with feelings of being out of control, or fears of abandonment and nonbeing. I meditate. I do Torah study. I attend worship services. Loving my wife and children and being loved by them is supremely important. It also helps to be able to make a difference in other people's lives – students, hospital patients, my congregation. I need to be needed. As an educator, I enjoy helping students become compassionate with old patients. I am also a lay chaplain at a hospital. My favorite patients are older. They're more real. They can't maintain denial the way younger people do. The conversations I have with older people are about meaning and what matters. It's about healing, not about cure. In one of his last poems, Yeats wrote: "Now that my ladder's gone, I must lie down where all the ladders start, in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." We need to undertake the impossible work of linking physical decline and spiritual growth.