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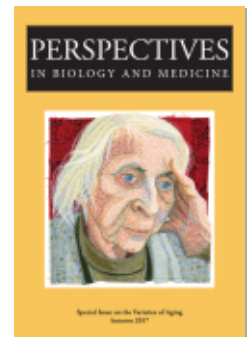
No Country for Old Men: Four Challenges for Men Facing the Fourth Age

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NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

*four challenges for men
facing the Fourth Age*

THOMAS R. COLE AND BEN SAXTON

ABSTRACT This essay reads the protagonist of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005), Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, as an exemplar of problems that contemporary aging men face when they look to ahead to the so-called Fourth Age. As the plot unfolds, Bell is an aging, increasingly ineffectual cowboy lawman who retires, renounces the violence that sustained his male dominance, and loses the moral certainty that ensured his identity. Like Bell, most old men struggle with four interrelated challenges as they move along the ever-lengthening journey of life: relevance, masculinity, love, and meaning.

“**T**HAT IS NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN.” So declared William Butler Yeats in “Sailing to Byzantium” (1928), a poem picturing “the young in each other’s arms.” Almost 80 years later, Cormac McCarthy titled his 2005 novel (which was quickly adapted to a popular film) *No Country for Old Men* to emphasize the plight of Ed Tom Bell, an aging sheriff who retires when faced with violence, drug trafficking, and moral chaos in a small West Texas town. As the lawman of Terrell County, Texas, for over 30 years, Bell has anchored his life in traditional values and common sense. But when a gruesome drug deal goes

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wrong, and the ruthlessly violent, amoral mercenary Anton Chigurh appears on the scene, Bell's world is shattered. On a cold, blustery day, Bell turns in his badge and leaves the courthouse for the last time, feeling bitter, defeated, and no longer sure who he is or where he fits.

In this essay we take Ed Tom Bell as an exemplar of problems that contemporary aging men face when they look to ahead to the so-called Fourth Age. Like Ed Tom Bell, most old men struggle with four interrelated challenges as they move along the ever-lengthening journey of life: relevance, masculinity, love, and meaning.

RELEVANCE

In the first quarter of the 20th century, the psychologist G. Stanley Hall was—like Yeats—concerned that old men had lost their place in society. In 1922, Hall, who had recently retired as President of Clark University, published *Senescence*, a gloomy book that virtually invented the field of gerontology. Feeling isolated and irrelevant in his transition “from leadership to the chimney corner,” Hall envisioned a time when “graybeards” would find renewed moral authority and social purpose. “The chief thesis of this book,” he wrote, “is that we have a function in this world that we have not yet risen to and which is of utmost importance” (ix). If Hall's comments were prescient about the plight of old men, they were overly optimistic about its solutions.

In the late 1960s, the psychiatrist Robert Butler coined a term that accounts for the devaluation of both older men and women in American society. *Ageism*, he pointed out, is a deep cultural prejudice toward old people manifested in stereotypes and myths, assumptions of decline, and discriminatory practices (Butler 1969). Although the media and consumer culture present many positive images of old people remaining young, these images are themselves another form of ageism, barely disguising the fear and loathing in store for old people who can no longer look youthful, perform midlife roles, and maintain their independence. (For interpretations of aging in film, see Chivers 2011; Cole, Carlin, and Carson 2015; Gravagne 2008.)

It is safe to say that old men have yet to find a function of utmost importance, or even of much importance at all. Ever since the institutionalization of retirement in the mid-20th century—45% of men over 65 were in the labor force in 1950, compared to 19% of men in 2015 (Fullerton 1999)—old men have often felt marginalized and useless. These problems worsen when men reach the Fourth Age, a murky stage of life sometimes marked by chronology (75 or 80 and above), sometimes marked by physical or biomedical markers of functional status or physical frailty, but almost always accompanied by deep-seated cultural dread and denial (Higgs and Gilleard 2015). More and more people are living into the Fourth Age. The average American male now lives to about 76, which is 20 years

longer than one century earlier (the figures for women are 81 and 58, respectively) (Bell and Miller 2017). Longer lives and economic stability often come at a price: old men are often invisible, or they are treated as patients and pensioners who are no longer full members in the moral community.

As the lawman of Terrell County, Texas, for over 30 years, McCarthy's Ed Tom Bell has anchored his life in traditional values and common sense. In short, Bell is the quintessential small-town sheriff: honorable, old-fashioned, and set in his ways. Like many a conservative redneck—which is how some critics see him (Cremean 2010)—Bell retains nostalgia for older times and stubbornly believes that society is getting worse. He notes, for example, that the worst problems teachers faced in the 1930s were talking in the classroom, chewing gum, running in the hallways, or copying someone else's homework. However, in Bell's world of the 1970s and '80s, teachers are dealing with rape, murder, arson, drugs, and suicide. Although he thinks that the society is sliding into moral chaos, Bell holds to his father's advice: "My Daddy always told me to just do the best you knew how and tell the truth. He said there was nothing to set a man's mind at ease like waking up in the morning and not having to decide who you were. And if you done somethin wrong just stand up and say you done it and say you're sorry and get on with it" (McCarthy 2005, 249).

The man who throws Bell's life into uncertainty is Anton Chigurh, a ruthlessly efficient killer and mercenary hired to retrieve money from a botched drug deal. The plot follows Chigurh as he pursues Llewellyn Moss, a young welder who stumbles across the money in a briefcase left at a gruesome death scene in the desert. Moss takes the briefcase to his trailer and plans to make a new life with his wife, Carla Jean. As Chigurh hunts Moss and the money, Bell helplessly trails the action and ponders the implications of their bloody conflict.

By the end of the plot, Bell is overwhelmed. Chigurh has escaped with the money. Moss and his wife are dead. The peace in Terrell County has been shattered. Bitter and bewildered, Bell retires from his post as sheriff. After serving his country for 30 years and following traditional codes and values, he finds himself in a position of impotence, disrespect, and confusion. Bell's unreflective moralism, his tepid faith, his stubborn belief in the "older times" and the men who lived during them—all of these consolations have proven to be worthless when Bell needed them the most:

I always thought I could at least someway put things right and I guess I just dont feel that way no more. . . . I'm bein asked to stand for something that I dont have the same belief in it I once did. . . . Now I've seen it held to the light. . . . I've been forced look at it again and forced to look at myself. For better or worse I do not know. . . . I never had them sorts of doubts before. (306)

MASCULINITY

How should Bell respond to the violence and retribution of Chigurh and the Mexican drug dealers? Many heroes of the American Western tradition—John Wayne or the Lone Ranger come to mind (Peebles 2004)—confirm their masculinity by violently confronting their foes. Unlike these recognizable heroes, however, Bell renounces violence. He decides that he will not “put his soul at hazard” by pursuing Chigurh. Bell walks away—he “quits”—and wonders what this means for him as a man.

As scholars of gender have shown, masculinity is not a natural collection of individual traits but rather a cultural story, a plot, or a script by which men are judged and judge themselves (Spector-Mersel 2006). While multiple masculinities circulate in any culture, the dominant or hegemonic version is the standard by which most men measure themselves. In the United States, the dominant story of masculinity is still that of the self-made man who proves himself at school, in sports, in the military, in business, in politics—in every competitive arena of a market-based society (Kimmel 2012). Physical strength, self-control, aggression, and competitiveness are hallmarks of this story of masculinity.

The problem is that, as Gabriela Spector-Mersel (2006) has noted, contemporary society offers older men an incomplete script for performing masculinity. “While in relation to early and middle adulthood we find clear models of dignified masculinity,” she writes, “these become vague, even non-existent, when referring to later life” (67). Older men lack an alternative to midlife masculine ideals, depriving them of guidelines for “being a man” and limiting their ability to fashion effective cultural identities. For most old men in American society, as a result, old age offers no landmarks of achievement or value; no lighthouse guiding one’s moral compass; no employment office with the sign “old men wanted.” Often there is only the province of retirement—a barren place, often marked by an absence of wealth, prestige, and personal meaning. Indeed, retirement is a primary source of depression in older men whose identity and self-esteem have depended on productivity, earning a living, and engaging with others in the workplace (Thompson and Langendoerfer 2016).

By the end of *No Country for Old Men*, Bell has departed from the traditional masculinity scripts of the American Western. He is an aging, ineffectual cowboy who has retired, renounced the violence that sustained his male dominance, and lost the moral certainty that ensured his identity. Not surprisingly, most critics consider Bell a failure, albeit a sympathetic failure. According to Peebles (2004), the end of the novel “sounds a distinct note of defeat for its protagonist and intermittent narrator, Sanderson Sheriff Ed Tom Bell He quits, though not without reason” (29). From this perspective, Bell not only fails to catch Chigurh but also fails to “be a man,” to live up to the masculine expectations of a sheriff and a productive member of society. In this way, critics unwittingly rely upon a

midlife image of masculinity and also contribute to the cultural “invisibility” of older men (Calasanti 2004; Spector-Mersel 2006; Thompson 2006).

In our opinion, Bell’s retirement and renunciation of violence offer a new way of thinking about aging masculinity—one that centers on Bell’s relationship with his wife Loretta.

LOVE

As former director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, George Vaillant (2012) recently summarized a key finding of his decades-long “happiness” study. “Happiness is only the cart,” he wrote. “Love is the horse” (50). Vaillant added that there have been few studies of how late-life relationships affect physical and mental health. His central point is that maintaining long-term loving relationships with partners, family, friends, and in community is essential to a good old age. “But in order to permit love to make you fulfilled,” Vaillant (2017) recently said, “you have to be able to take it in, which means that you have to feel inside that you are loved, instead of finding all kinds of rational reasons why people are just acting as if they love you. The importance of ‘metabolizing’ love is essential.”

As we mature into adulthood, what is the potential for personal growth? William James (1890) once wrote that, “in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again” (121). Vaillant, in contrast, argues that older people *can* grow and change—sometimes drastically. “Even a hopeless midlife can blossom into a joyous old age,” he writes (Vaillant 2012, 365).

The final scene of the film version of *No Country for Old Men* (Coen 2007) offers a glimpse of home and Bell’s future with Loretta. As the pair sits around the breakfast table, Loretta pours them coffee; Bell looks uncomfortable and out of place. “Maybe I’ll go riding,” he suggests. “I can’t plan your day,” she replies. After suggesting that they go for a ride *together*, she replies, even more pointedly, “Lord, no, I’m not retired.” Unlike her husband, the comment implies, Loretta still has a useful role to fill in the community. Bell keeps trying: “Maybe I’ll help out here, then,” he offers. “Better not,” she answers, clearly delineating her role as keeper of the home. In the end, their relationship remains traditionally gendered. Bell will depend on her for moral and emotional support, and she will love him without resentment, regret, or reservation. But without the social props and privileges of the cowboy hero, Bell seems overwhelmed in the face of impending retirement and death, which are ultimately the same thing.

In our opinion, however, the road “on ahead” is not death but a new phase of life that is filled with uncertainty and promise with Loretta. Critics who dismiss Bell as a failure should consider the courage that it takes him after 30 years to question his most cherished values. After the transformative and traumatic events that he witnesses—after his views are “held to the light” (McCarthy 2005,

306)—Bell realizes that his own perspective is insufficient to account for what he has seen, which paves the way for a transformative conversation with Loretta. As David Cremean (2010) puts it: “Bell has examined his old certitudes and found them lacking, recognized them to be at heart but mere excuses. He is now unconcerned with what others think, has moved beyond thinking and acting the way he was expected to” (28). He has, in other words, moved beyond the hegemonic masculinity script of middle age and seeks to redefine its meaning for himself.

When one considers the final scene from this perspective—Bell telling a vital and vulnerable part of himself to Loretta—his final dream takes on further significance. In the dream, which Bells tells Loretta at the breakfast table, his father has gone ahead to an undetermined location to prepare a fire, and there is no telling how long it will take to get there. “I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do,” Bell says, “and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there” (McCarthy 2005, 309).

MEANING

Like G. Stanley Hall, Carl Jung (1933) and Erik Erikson (1964) also noted that modern progress both lengthened old age and drained it of substance. Our culture provides old people with no viable meanings or norms by which to live. Echoing Hall, the Austrian sociologist Leopold Rosenmayr (1980) declared that the position of older people in Western society “can only be reoriented and changed if viable ideals become visible and receive some social support” (60). In a postmodern, multicultural, capitalist society in which change moves at a digital pace, such ideals are not likely to emerge.

Hence, the task of finding significance in later life falls to individuals in their relationships with family and community. Learning to inhabit one’s own old age requires meeting the challenges of love and relevance, and feeling that one’s life matters even in the face of frailty, disease, and death. A central developmental task here is the paradoxical work of learning to hold on and let go: struggling, on the one hand, to stay healthy, to care for ourselves and others, to live fully and joyfully; and learning, on the other hand, when it is time to accept that we really do need help from others or when it is time to let go of life (O’Neill 2015).

Learning to live this way is the spiritual work of aging; it is not work that our culture encourages. Today we live healthier, longer lives, yet we are also burdened with chronic disease and misled by a false belief in medical salvation. Despite the promises of some molecular biologists and biological gerontologists, we believe that no amount of applied science and technology will ever transform aging into a solvable problem: aging will remain part of the mystery of entering and leaving this world. It requires meaning, not only management.

While critics have tended to interpret Bell's dream of his father in terms of its broader resonances, especially Bell's impending death, the images also represent the uncertainty of his journey toward the Fourth Age. As one of many reflective reminiscences and conversations, Bell's dream stands as the centerpiece of an ongoing life review (Butler 1963). Like Yeats's old man, who exists in transit between his homeland and the transcendent city of Byzantium, the final images in *No Country* are of travel, impermanence, and flux. By declining to reveal Bell's fate, McCarthy foregrounds the process, or the coming-to-be, of the journey over any final outcome. Ed Tom Bell is no longer certain of who he is—which leaves him free to find out what it might mean to be an old man. "It's a life's work see yourself for what you really are," he says, "and even then you might be wrong" (McCarthy 2005, 295).

CONCLUSION

American men tend to see life's journey as a one-man trip. We internalize the image of the self-made man, an image that views masculinity and femininity as polar opposites and that constrains our ability to accept dependence and the need for others. Women more often accept the limitations of their bodies and feel the desire and need to travel with others. The last leg of the trip is filled with challenges and opportunities, through a countryside often rugged and inhospitable. Trying to go it alone makes it difficult to find a home. If old men hope to live well into the Fourth Age, they will have to confront the relational challenges of relevance, masculinity, love, and meaning.

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