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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Gone Fishin' – Forever

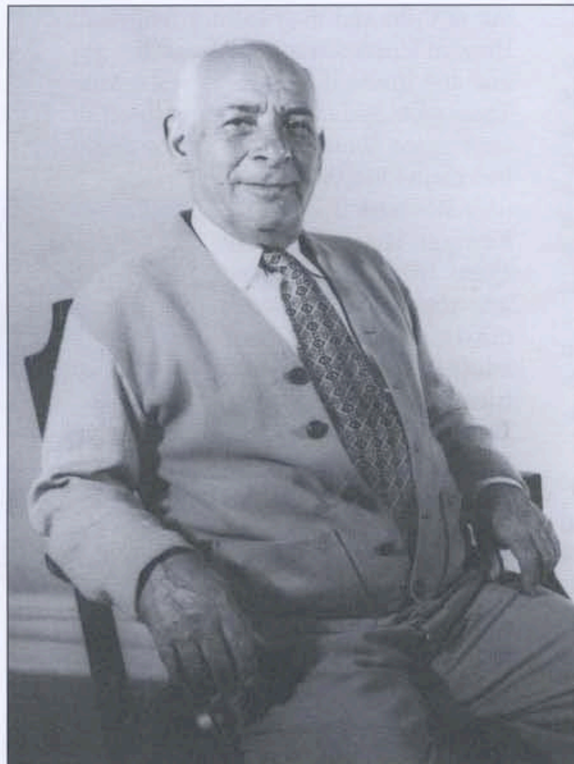
William C. Levin

When I was eleven I got to visit my grandparents in Florida. Over the years they had hosted dozens of vacationing relatives, so they knew how to deal with me. They dropped me off at the beach with my fishing gear. Knowing nothing about local fishing techniques, I decided to use my "spying on an expert" technique. In the midst of all the Miami Beach sun bathers was an old looking guy who was sitting next to a fishing pole he had stuck in the sand. I sat a few yards behind him and began collecting data on his fishing secrets. He seemed to be reading. This was a puzzling tactic, since real fisherpersons never read while fishing. But I knew it to be a fishing ruse since he never turned a page. However, he also never checked his line for bites, bait deterioration or spontaneous equipment failure. Finally, I started toward him, intending to ask what he hoped to accomplish by such lax fishing procedures. I was, however, beaten to the punch by another old guy (I'll call him the "onlooker") who must also have been watching my mystery fisherman. For reasons largely unrelated to fishing, I remember their exchange to this day.

"Aren't you going to check that thing?" onlooker asked. "Nope," shot back mystery fisher without looking up. "Why not?" Onlooker seemed puzzled. "Fish can steal your bait without you ever notice." (That's how Onlooker talked. I remember.) "Then what's the good of keeping the line out in the water?" Onlooker asked exactly what I wanted to ask.

Mystery fisher sighed with impatience and looked up at his interrogator. "It's really none of your business, but I'll tell you anyway. I don't use bait or hooks because I don't want any fish. I don't want any fish because I hate them. And the only reason I come out here is because my wife makes me go fishing to get me out of the house." Then, came the line I remember the best, since mystery fisher said it in such a sour, resentful way. "Isn't that what they make you do when you retire? Fish?"

Sour fisher looked back down at his book in a clear signal of dismissal, and onlooker looked at me. He smiled and shrugged in a way that I understood to mean "So, there are people like this. What can you do?" He walked away. So did I.



For many years this story was nothing more than a curious memory from my youth. It had confused me so. I loved fishing and thought that a life with nothing to do but fish would be heaven. How could this old guy be so nasty and unhappy when he was free to do whatever he wanted, including fish? The story of sour old mystery fisher didn't begin to make much sense to me until almost thirty years later when I saw how my parents and their friends were aging, and started to read the literature in my field of sociology on the subject of late life.

Sociologists of aging have studied the way getting older influences how people fit into society. It is easy to show how at different stages of our lives we are allowed, or expected, to do different things. For example, infants are free to do as they please, up to a certain age, at which time parents require them to learn how to "behave" in ways that accommodate the needs of others in the family. As any parent will attest, toilet training is a convenience. And changes in the relation between the individual and society continues to change through the life span. Societal expectations for the behavior of people over the ages of 65 or 70 are different than they are for people who are 40 or 50. This is no big discovery. American society expects less of older people in terms of work and responsibility than it does of younger people.

But what caught my attention was the wide range of activity levels and styles of life I saw among my parents' retired friends who were still quite healthy in their sixties and seventies. Some were so active they seemed supercharged. They had calendars stuffed with activities like golf, gardening, painting, sculpting, and volunteer work for worthy causes such as environmental campaigns, helping at a hospital or fund-raising for favored causes and candidates. In addition, they had their countless so-

cial engagements for dinner, bridge or just talk. Many claimed that they were busier in retirement than they had been when they were working or raising their families. My mother has been this way since she moved to Florida with Dad. I can hardly reach her on the phone between her engagements and travel. Others among my parents' circle were much less active. They were not so eager to stay busy. They tended to read, watch television and just enjoy the slower pace of life and relief from the responsibilities of mid-life. It's not that they were ill. They just enjoyed a more sedentary life. This was the way my father spent his retirement. When he was younger my father was one of those non-stop guys who, in addition to his very demanding work life, found time for gardening, fishing, home care and repair, woodworking, boating and us. But in retirement, Dad read, played golf from a cart, and kept the car gassed up to the top, just in case. That was it.

What I saw among my parents' generation was reflected in the literature of social gerontology. Beginning in the early 1960's thinking about aging in society was dominated by a debate between two opposing theories of how to most successfully experience later life in America. One, called *Disengagement Theory*, argued that the most satisfactory old age could be achieved by the withdrawal (by the individual) or removal (by society) of people from the social involvements they had in mid-life. The proponents of this theory claimed that such disengagement, brought on by the inevitable decline in capacity over time, is beneficial to both the individual and the society. For the individual, disengagement is supposed to provide the time for a deliberate, naturally occurring review of one's life and the arrangement of one's affairs. For the society, disengagement serves to remove people from positions of power and responsibility before they begin to make the costly errors that physical decline with age inevitably would cause. In other words, since we all slow down as we age and will eventually die, it is natural (and best) to disengage from society so as to meet the end of life with equanimity and as little disruption as possible.

By contrast, *Activity Theory* contended that the best late life could be achieved by retaining one's higher level of social involvements as long as possible. The logic was that people must have constant social interactions in order to maintain an adequate sense of self, and that this is true no matter how old the individual. Disengagement from daily interaction with others would bring about declining sense of self, and so, declines in life satisfaction. In other words, late life requires social involvement just the same as it does during the rest of the life span. The marching song of this theory has been "use it, or lose it."

There could not have been two more directly opposing views of the best plan for one's old age. The debate between them raged in the professional journals, and, despite the fact that the data collected to resolve the debate was far from conclusive, professionals in the practice of geriatric medicine and social services dispensed lots of advice as if one side or the other was clearly correct. In fact, it now looks as if both were, at the very least, oversimplifying matters.

A few social gerontologists who tried to resolve the debate came up with compromise solutions. One suggested that, depending upon an individual's temperament, either disengagement or activity could be the best plan for his or her late life. So people with a great need for activity and social interaction (with selves that might be called "socially dependent") would do best to be active in late life. More sedentary people with lower needs for social interaction (what might be called "independentselves") would be more satisfied with the relatively disengaged life.

I liked the resolution. I found it neat, though none too surprising. It made sense that there would be no one, best, level of activity and social involvement for all older people. After all, the elderly are the most heterogeneous segment of the population on a number of measures, including income, health, and level of activity. But before you dismiss the issue of activity versus disengagement as a sociological tempest in a teapot, consider again the case of the sour, old mystery fisher and the bemused, old onlooker. A man who goes fishing on orders of his wife and intentionally does not bait his line has failed to come to terms with the kind of late life is right for him. If he had an active and successful life until he retired, it would have been a large error to have left work without some plan for what he would do next. Too often people move from one phase of their lives to another without any (much less, careful) examination of what is in their best interests in the new life they will live. For example, when the last child leaves home and you are left alone in the house with your spouse, will the demands of the empty nest leave you with only the old patterns of life, and with nothing to replace them? What will a person like you (assuming you have thought about this) need after the kids go? And when it comes to growing old, what will be best for you when you reach the ages of 65, 70 or 80? If you are unlucky enough to be sick, poor, or just plain nasty, there might be nothing you can do to make your late life enjoyable. But failure to think clearly about what is best for the kind of person you are at 65 can leave you fishing with no bait even though you could do better.

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