

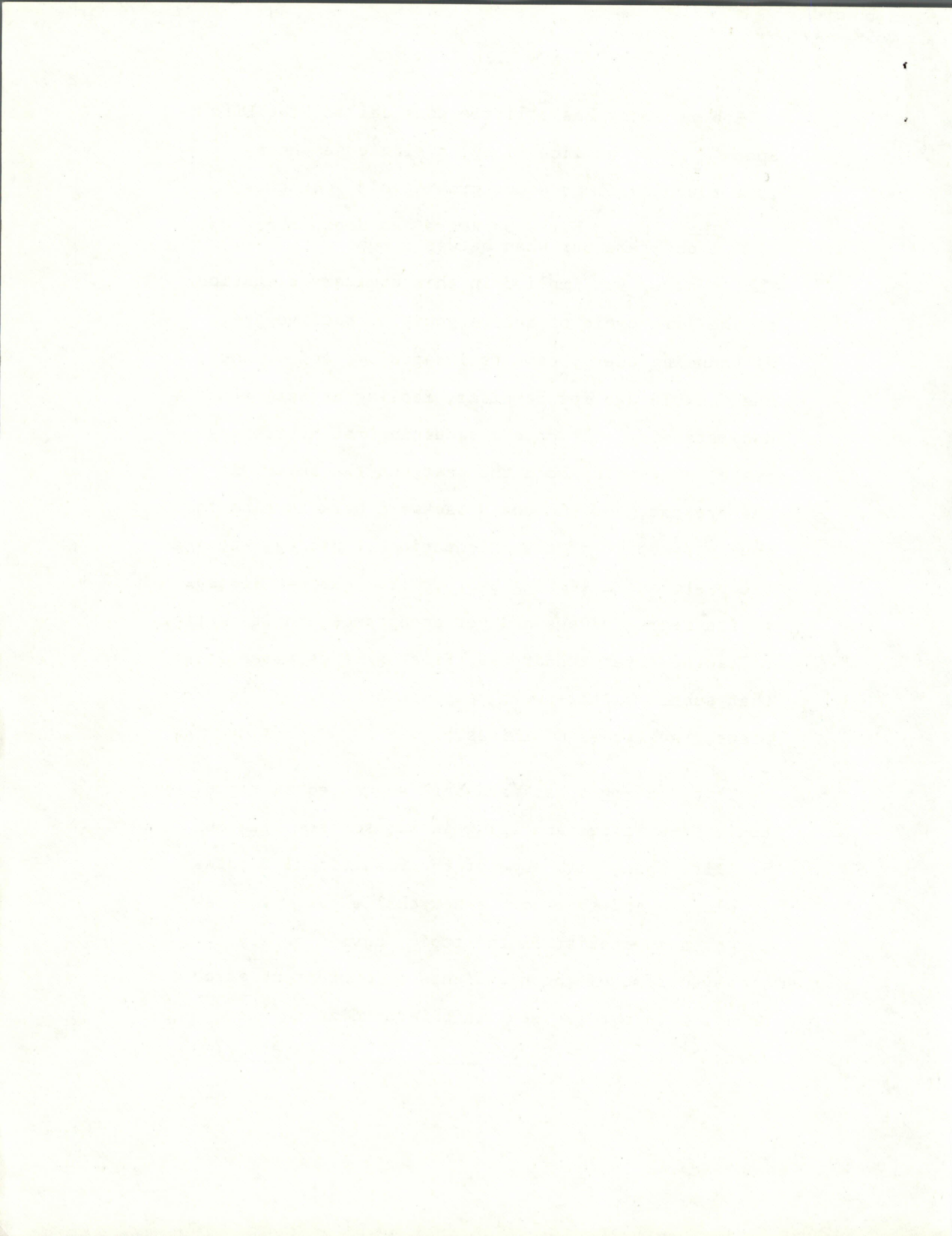
THE NEW LIFE SPAN

Robert Frost has a little poem called "The Life Span." Only two lines long, a single sentence, it is a touching image about growing old. It goes,

The old dog barks backward and doesn't get up;
I can remember when he was a pup.

That's all. But implied in this ordinary situation is the life cycle of active youth to passive age, of bounding energy come to incapacity, and of the need in old age for familiar, feeling attention and understanding. At once a saddening yet heartening image, suggesting both the past and the future in the present, the old dog's backward bark is also of course symbolic of the orientation of old age--toward the past, and a looking back to it. (Repeat lines). In its regretfulness and yet acceptance, in its matter of factness yet tenderness, Frost's lines evoke in us that subtle bitter-sweet response called, by classical poets, the "tears of things."

That old dog's backward bark suggested my topic tonight: old age and aging in our society with our new life span, with some of the traditional burdens of old age and some of its new challenges. I speak not as a specialist in the topic, having merely surveyed some of the highlights of current research on aging in our society, which according to the Sept. 10 issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education



has recently become a growth industry.

But it is a subject of not just passing interest to me, having had this year my 60th birthday, and thus entered upon that threshold--in the general conception, anyway--between middle age and old age. Fortunately, the stereotyped negative image of old age (impotence, senility, worthlessness) is being replaced by some distinctions of the aging process, dictated by social realities of the last half of this century. Sociologists now generally divide the final stage of life into three phases: the young-old (early 60s to early 70s), the old (mid 70s to mid 80s), and the elderly, or old-old (mid 80s and beyond). While these chronological distinctions are hardly laws, they are useful in defining some realities hitherto obscured by the traditional notions of middle and old age.

Take the term, "young-old", for example, which has come into common speech. It is a concept based not on chronological age originally, but on health and social characteristics. Thus a young-old person might be 55 or 85. But the word came into being, says Dr. Neugartin, to signify "a new historical phenomenon": that a very large group of retirees or near retirement and their spouses are healthy and vigorous, relatively well off financially, well integrated into the lives

of their families and communities, and politically active" (Daedalus, Winter, 33). The term thus represents the social reality that the line between middle age and old age is no longer clear, whatever Social Security or the Association of Retired People might say. As one of this young-old group, part of this so-called new historical phenomenon, let me share with you some of my interests about what is new, and old, about aging.

As we near the end of this century, one thing it has taught us is that old is not old in the way it has been or used to be. Indeed, as the mean age of the U.S. population grows older, as we see that, on the average, people are spending one-quarter of their adult lifetime in retirement, the nation is in the process of redefining what "old" is. We are, say the specialists, in the midst of a "revolution of longevity." For it is a new social reality that now, in industrialized nations, most people grow old before they die.

Here are some signs of the times.

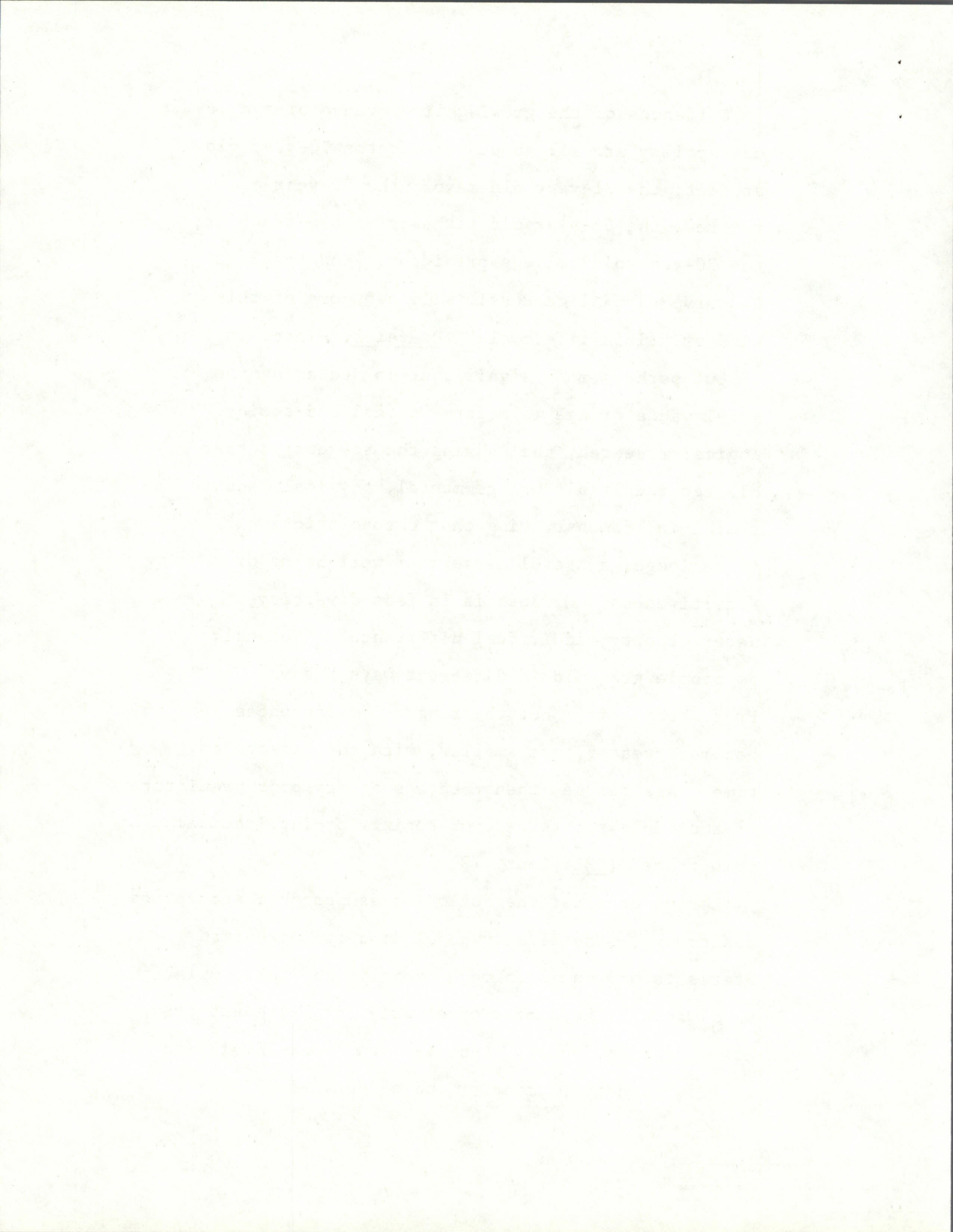
Rep. Claude Pepper, himself 85, recently sponsored a bill that would eliminate mandatory retirement for college faculty and administrators and let them work as long as they wanted to. The bill, said Pepper, declares age irrelevant in employment, just as with sex or race.



Evidences of the growing irrelevance of age in our society are all about us: in the 70-year old student; the 21-year old mayor; the 50-year old retiree; the 65-year old father of a pre-schooler; the 30-year old college president. And the 21st Century, says Alice Rossi, will see more of this kind of "fluid life cycle" (Daedalus, Winter 86).

But perhaps most significant in declaring the irrelevance of age is modern medical and sociological research, challenging the stereotype that old age inevitably brings mental, physical, and social and demonstrating that chronological age is no longer a useful measure of well-being or effectiveness. Oldness is in fact diversity, heterogeneity, individual difference. "Not only do people grow old in different ways," says Prof. Neugartn, "but the range of differences becomes greater, not smaller, with the passage of time. Age per se, then, becomes a very poor predictor of the adult's physical, or social, or intellectual competence" (CHE, Sept. 10).

Let us consider the following demographic statistics and trends. The elderly population of the United States is growing much more rapidly than the population as a whole. The number of elderly (65 years and over) has more than doubled since 1950 to about 28 million in 1984, and the number of the older aged (85 years



and over) has more than quadrupled since 1950 to about 2.6 million. From a mere 8 percent in 1950, the percentage of elderly in the population climbed to 12 percent in 1984. By 2020, it is forecast, about 17 percent of the total U.S. population will be elderly, that is to the same proportion there is now in the most "elderly" state in the U.S. today, Florida (Daedalus, 77).

Put in another perspective, the population 65 years and older increased by 28 percent in the decade of the 70s, and the 85 years old and over group increased by 59 percent, compared with an 11 percent increase for the population as a whole. The U.S. Census estimates that among babies born in 1980, 77 percent can look forward to reaching age 65. This is an unprecedented statistic, and in conjunction with other dramatic evidence of longevity has led one sociologist to observe that two-thirds of the improvement of longevity in the entire world, from prehistoric times to the present, has taken place in the brief period since 1900 (Daedalus, 53).

And this trend in longer lives is true for most other developed nations, in Western Europe and Japan, for example. Low fertility and mortality thus give rise to populations that are not growing and to rising

percentages of elderly persons in that stationary population.

Clearly this new life span will have widening influence on society: on our laws, on political structures, on educational systems, and on various aspects of culture itself, beginning with the family, where extended life spans create new kinship patterns that encompass four or more generations, which in turn brings positive dimensions to grandparenting (CHE, Sept. 10).

But a couple of these implications we might speculate on.

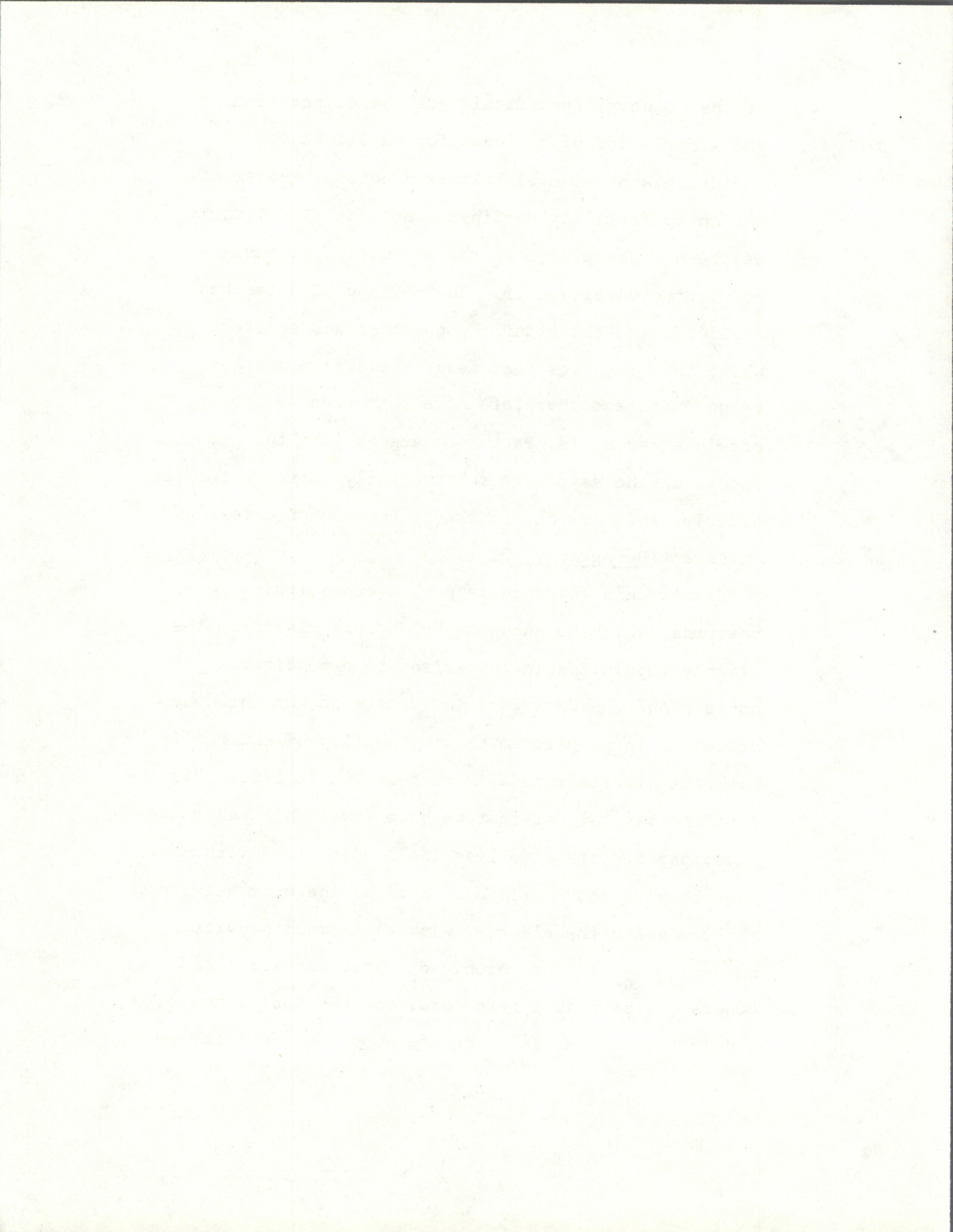
One of course will be money, public money, the problem of providing health and social service, Social Security Benefits, adequate housing and satisfying jobs for the elderly, at the very time when possible competition between the elderly and children for societal support will be the greatest. At present U.S government expenditures for persons aged 65 and above, who represent just 12 percent of the population, are nearly 30 percent of the annual federal budget. At present expenditure levels, by the year 2030 (when 20 percent of the population will be 65 or older), these expenditures will represent about 60 percent of the annual budget. It is hard to foresee a social policy that would allocate 3/5th of the annual budget for support of the older population.

But the issue is not just how much money, but on whom and how it is shared for the whole public welfare

of the country, specifically in the competition of the elderly and of children for public funds. As the demographer Samuel Patterson notes, because of the sharp fertility declines since the 1950s, there has been a sharp drop in the proportion of the population under age 15. The child population has declined, and the elderly population has spurted.

While this suggests that fewer children means less competition and therefore more resources and social services per child, Patterson argues just the opposite: conditions he says have substantially improved for the elderly, and they have markedly deteriorated for children (Demography, 21,1984).

Patterson's evidence is public expenditure patterns, which he shows to be sharply rising on the elderly population in comparison to expenditures per child. And the deteriorating status of the child he traces in large part to the instability of the family, with the divorce rate of more than 50% in 1980. "It's not," he says, "just that we have fewer children these days; parents are also less inclined to live with the ones they've got" (Ibid). Such an inequity between the young and the elderly, with their much heavier burdens of acute and chronic disease, Patterson and others see as posing hard moral choices for us now and in the future, as we decide about our collective

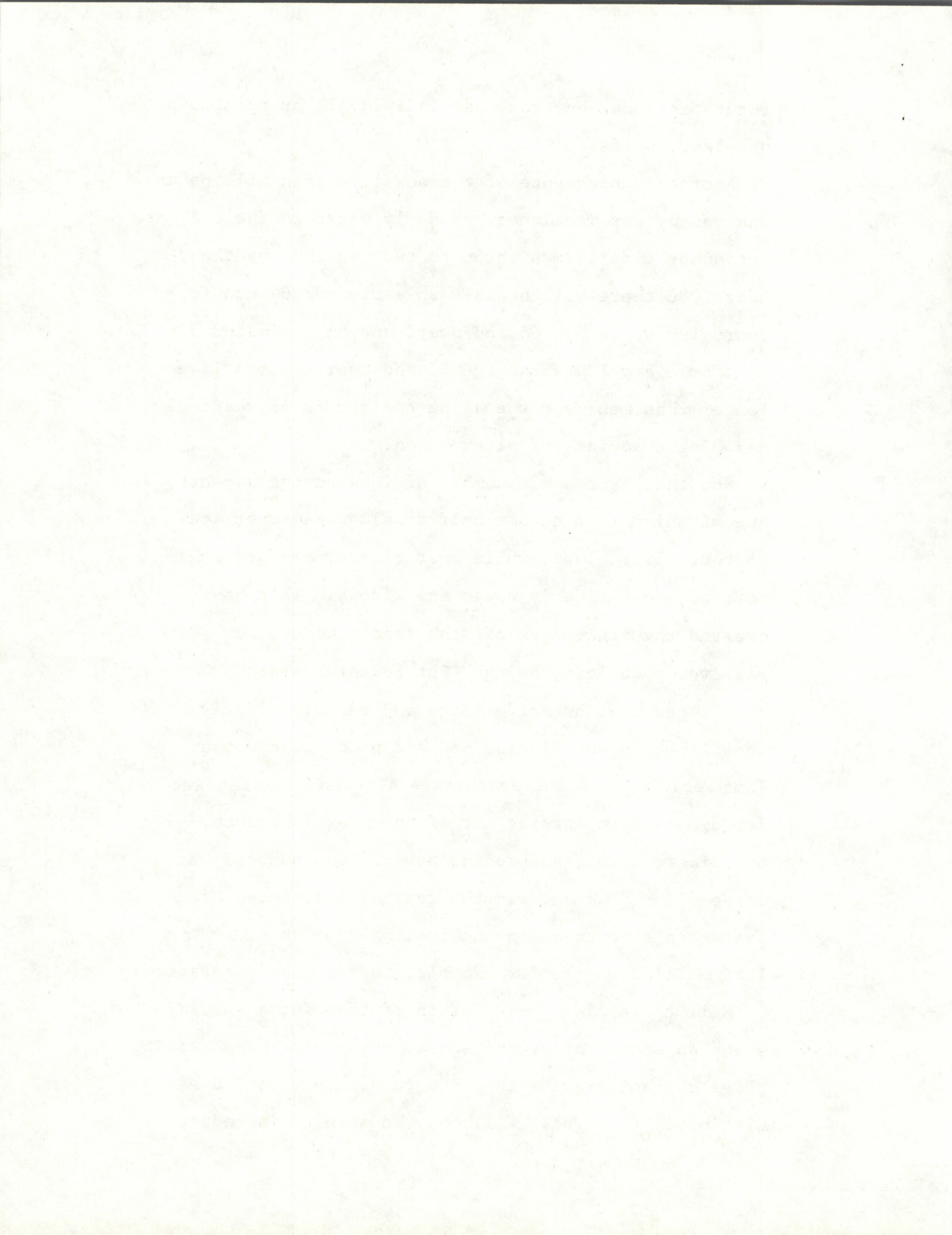


future as a nation, not just individual, or age group, or class, welfare.

Another consequence of the new life span will be an increasing sex imbalance. Elderly women in the U.S. now outnumber elderly men three to two, so that by the year 2000 there will be only an estimated 64 men for every 100 women age 65 and over, and an estimated 38 men for every 100 women age 85 and over. Women live longer than men, and the aging society is increasingly becoming a society of older women.

Now that fact has a number of interesting aspects, one of which is that one half of all women over age 75 today live alone; while most elderly men are still married, most elderly women are widows. This has created the stereotype of "the lonely widow," a passive, powerless, being. But recent research challenges that negative image and reports elderly women seeking and finding new and productive roles. Some sociologists indeed foresee a new source of power for older women arising out of this sex imbalance, new political, moral, and social power. The numbers of these elderly women, and the general influences of the women's movement in the last half of this century, lead Matilda White, for example, to pose these questions:

Will these older women of the future set a special stamp on social norms and social structures, emphasizing those characteristics that are currently regarded as distinctly feminine? Will they be able to introduce

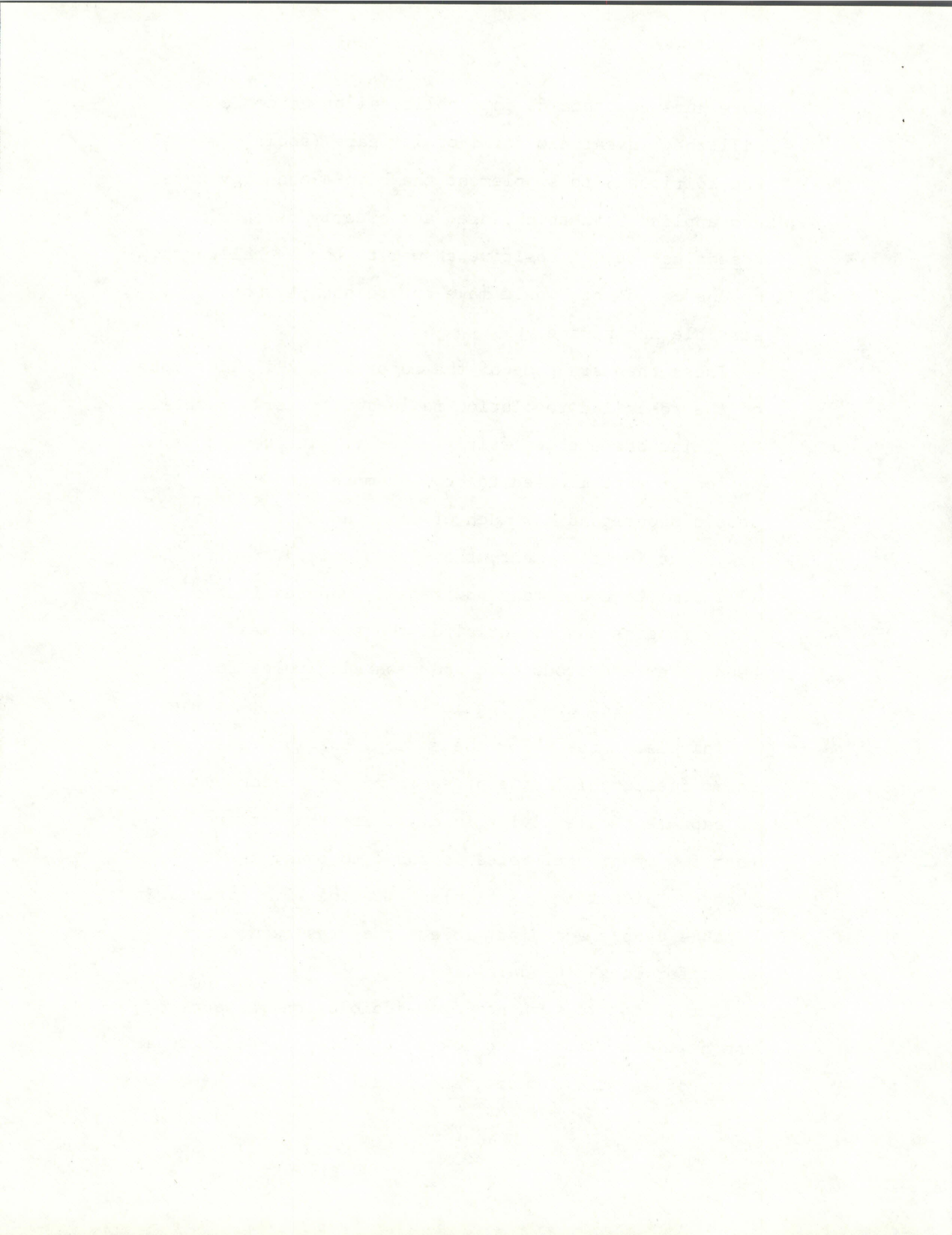


more humane standards into political or economic life? Will they invent new forms of lay care (social, mental, and spiritual) to supplement the high-technology cures now applied both to children and elderly parents?

(Daedalus, 66) A positive answer to those challenges, no one can doubt, would make future society more sensible and humane.

These then are some of the major social implications of the so-called revolution in longevity for our society. One thing has emerged fairly clearly. Retirement is no longer what it used to be. As more and more people understand how much of their adult lives in now spent in retirement, they--and society itself--will come to understand how grossly underestimated the strengths and potential of those added years have been. New and productive and rewarding roles for the "young-old" are being actively explored. As one sociologist notes, "For the future, one inference seems inescapable: the presence of increasing number of capable people living in a society that offers them few meaningful roles is bound to bring about changes, either in the people or in the role structures. Capable people and empty role structures cannot co-exist for long" (Daedalus, 63).

But I want to turn now from sociological aspects of the new life span to a quick survey of some traditional views of age and old age, and finally to some individual,

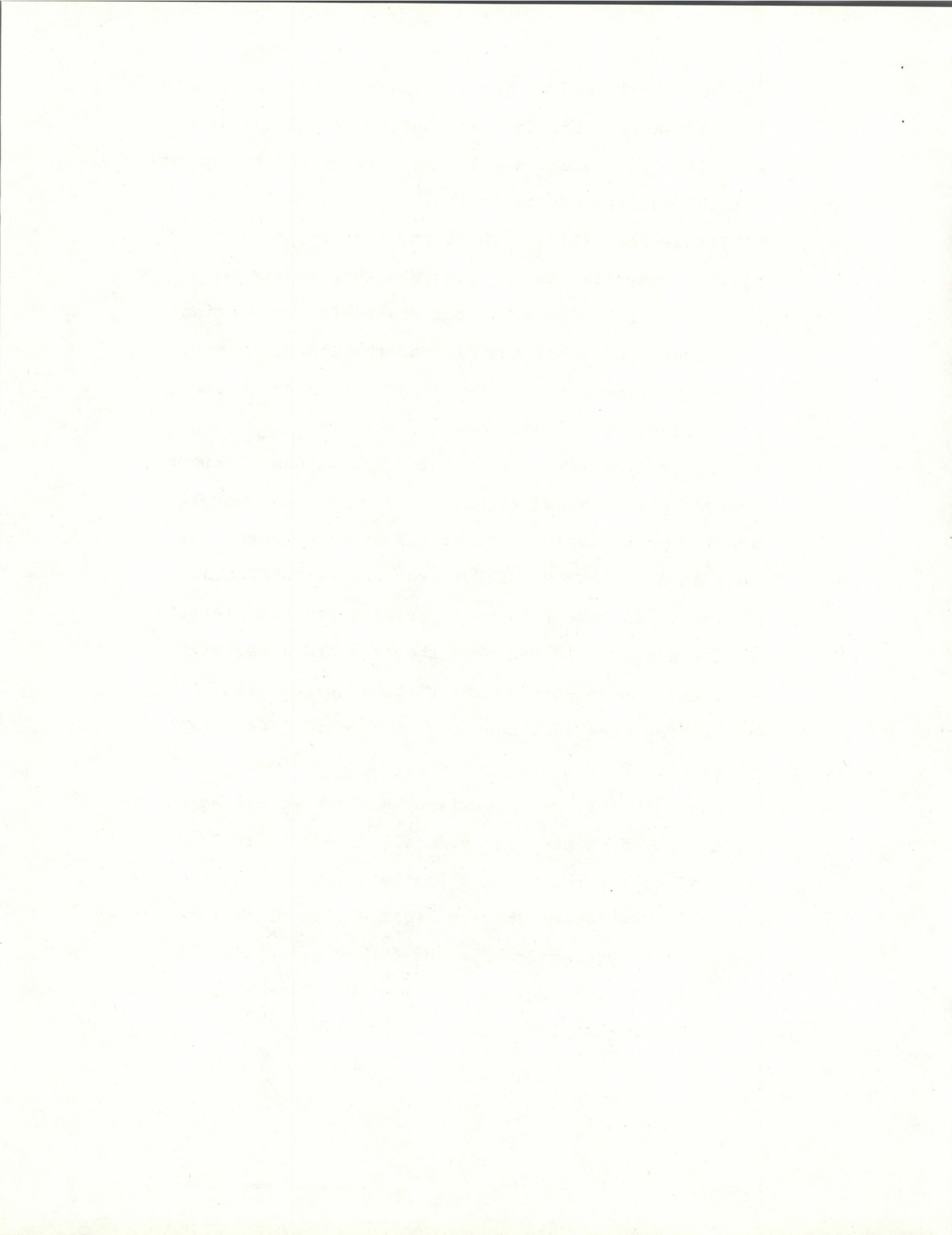


psychological, and moral experience of the aging process. My focus here, unrefined and hurried as it is, is what is most important about a full, long life, not the quantity but the quality of its length.

It has been said, with truth, that the reason old age was venerated in the past was that it was so extraordinary. Certainly one reason for veneration and respect was that the old had the longest memory, and their remembered past--of war and peace, kinship, of healing, of art and song, of the practical know-how of crafts--was power, magic, and wisdom. Memory was the custodian of traditions and ensured community and its preservation, and it was at once feared and venerated, as our words "wizard" and "witch" still reflect. In some Polynesian tribes, for example, the adults ate the old men when they reached a certain age, thereby absorbing the victims' wisdom and preventing them from becoming too-powerful wizards (Beauvoir, 94).

The Ojibways, on Lake Winnepeg, revered old age as a sign of virtue, and generally the old, it is alleged, preferred being solemnly put to death. "There was a feast; they smoked the pipe of peace; sang and danced; and while the father was still singing, the son would kill him with a tomahawk."

In highly developed ancient societies old age



has been variously valued. To generalize breezily, the patriarchal age of the Old Testament revered old age and prophetic wisdom. The writers of the holy books recalled a heroic past in order to shame the wicked present, a past characterized by ancestors of very great longevity. "There were giants before the flood," Genesis avers. And, we are admonished in the Book of Judges, "The fear of the Lord prolongeth days; but the years of the wicked shall be shortened."

In the New Testament by contrast power is transferred from the Father to the Son, where the son of God is the saviour, and the images of power are childhood and innocence and the ultimate sacrifice of young manhood for the salvation of others. About old age Jesus himself was anything but sentimental, to judge by his chilling words reported in the Gospel of St. John, as he says to Peter: "When you were young you fastened your belt and walked where you chose; but when you are old you will stretch out your arm, and a stranger will bind you fast, and carry you where you have no wish to go" (xxi, 18). That is a stark vision of being old in a world without charity.

The Greek civilization had glorified youth, in accord generally with the view of Aristotle that old age be dismissed from power, as against Plato's respect for the elderly in their prudent wisdom. Body beauty,



action, the passions, these were the glory of Greece, where it had been proverbial to say, "Whom the gods love die young." The grandeur of Rome we associate more with power, and age, and authority, and these commended by elders, senators, men of property, like Seneca and Cicero, Cicero indeed having written one of the earliest and most durable books on growing old.

That image of age and authority and power, assimilated by the Puritans into their powerful patriarchal Old Testament traditions, characterized colonial America, and those images (powdered wigs, silver buckles, high seriousness), transmuted somewhat persisted into the revolution and founding fathers: those founders not radicals, nor mohawks, nor wild revolutionaries, but mature, prudent, responsible, and dutiful citizens, signers of independence and makers of a new constitution.

But already in post-revolutionary America, the idealization of youth and the obsolence of the aged begins the contention of the generations again. By the 1850s Emerson and Whitman were preaching the virtues of newness and youth, and Thoreau could write: "Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified as an instructor as youth, for it has not profited as much as it has lost....Practically, the old have no very important advice to give to the young, their experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures." That is the voice of liberty

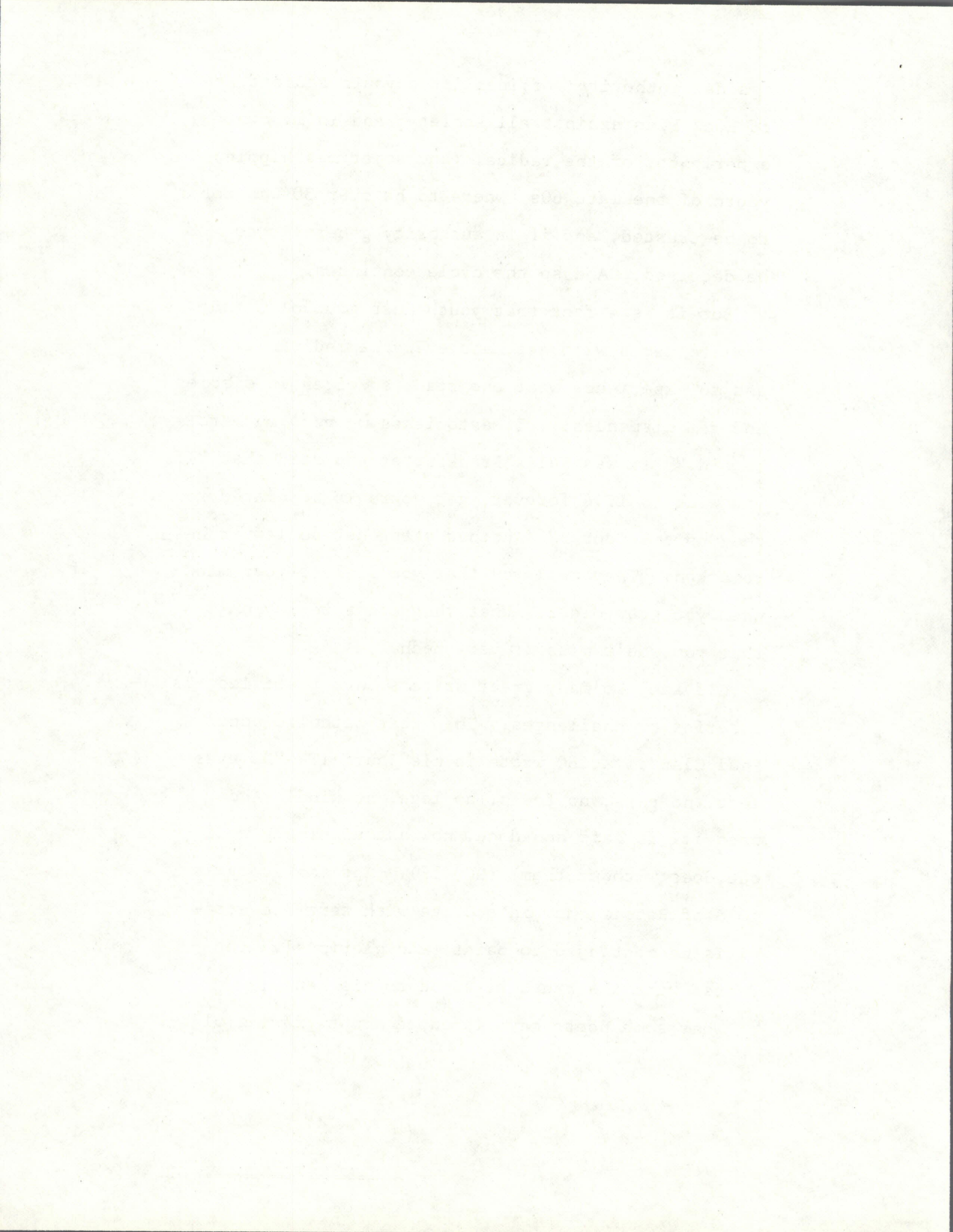


against authority, of idealistic youth against age; of Huck Finn against all society; and in my own experience, of the radical (and sometimes hippie) youth of the late 60s, where to be over 30 was not to be trusted, and if in authority generally to be despised. And so the cycle continues.

But it is a fact that youth must grow old, and come to terms with age, and everyone individually, and to experience what one reads so often in diaries and reminiscences: "It astonishes me very much to be old." It was Felix Frankfurter who said that "If you want to live forever, get yourself appointed to the Supreme Court." Another octogenarian lawyer has remarked, "They tell you that you'll lose your mind when you grow older. What they don't tell you is that you won't miss it very much."

Old age, so many great writers have testified, is a series of challenges. The great catholic poet Paul Claudel at 80 wrote in his journal: "No eyes left, no ears, no teeth, no legs, no wind! And when all is said and done, how astonishingly well one does without them" (MC, 17). And the story is told of Renoir, how in old age with terrible arthritis he continued to paint (and gloriously) for years, with the brush strapped to his hand.

What some poets have lamented about growing old



is that the body is diminished or decays so much faster than human passions, and especially desire. Thus the Irish poet Yeats, only in his 60s, chafed under his diminished powers (including sexual), and cried out:

What shall I do with this absurdity--
O heart, O troubled heart--this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail.

He had a testical transplant later to regenerate himself and while that didn't work he nevertheless continued to write great poetry well into his 70s. As did Thomas Hardy even more notably, who published a distinguished volume of verse when he was 88. He too remarked the powerful contest of the feeling heart in the feeble body, looking into his mirror and writing:

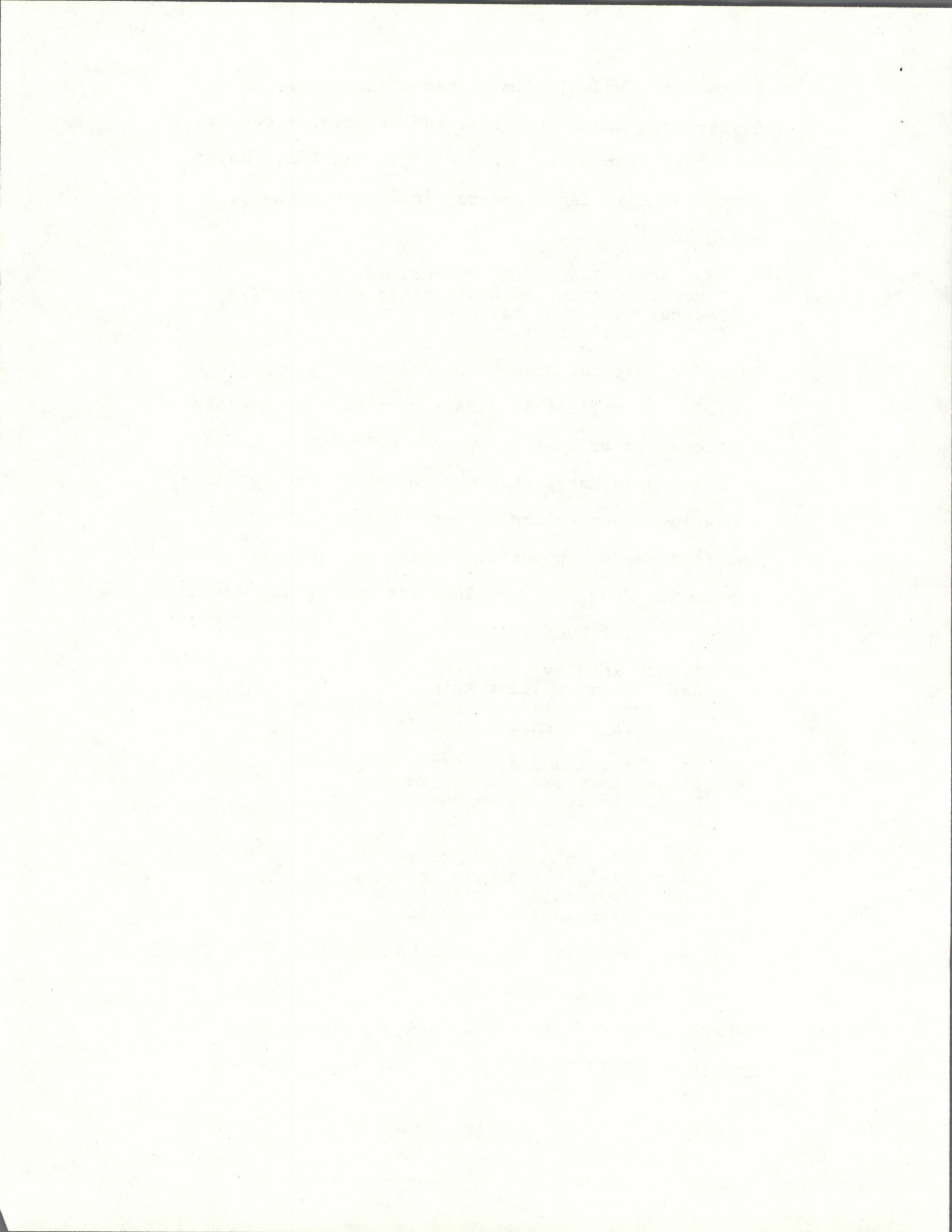
I LOOK INTO MY GLASS

I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, "Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!"

For then, I undistressed
By hearts grown cold to me,
Could lonely wait my endless rest
With equanimity.

But Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide.

As you would expect, Ralph Waldo Emerson met the coming of old age in himself with philosophical acceptance and wrote one of his best poems about it, Terminus, in the images of calm harbor, autumnal

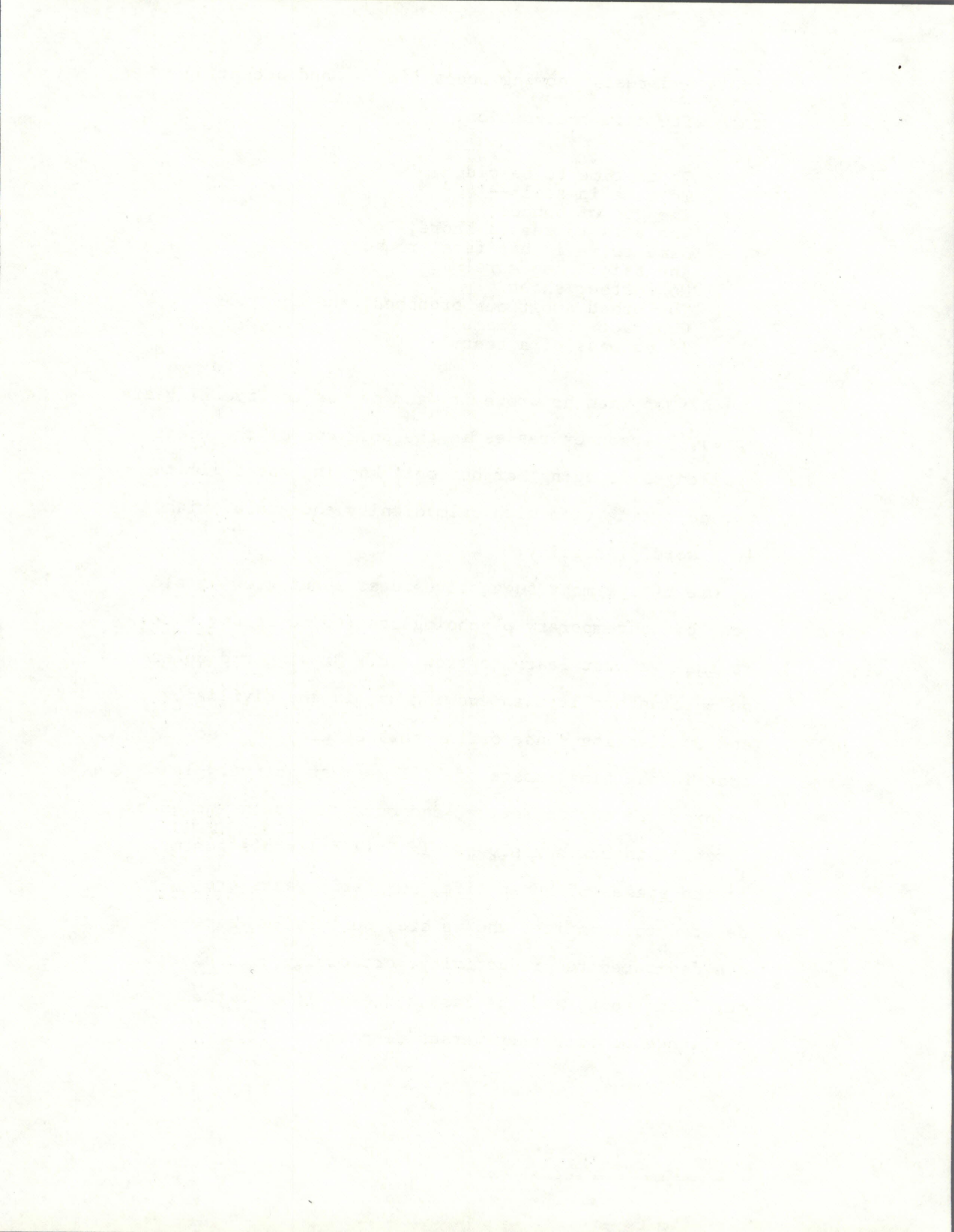


roots and rest, knowing one's limits and accepting them with calm resignation.

It is time to be old,
 To take in sail:--
 The god of bounds,
 Who sets to seas a shore,
 Came to me in his fatal rounds,
 And said: 'No more!
 No farther shoot
 Thy broad ambitious branches, and thy root.
 Contract thy firmament
 To compass of a tent.'

Only 63 when he wrote it (and he was to live 17 years more), Emerson expresses in the poem one of the great challenges of aging, of not only knowing one's limits but accepting them with calm dignity and grace, with, in a word, integrity.

One of the most suggestive ideas about growing old made by contemporary psychologists (to me at any rate) is that we must learn to grow old. Growing old comes no more naturally than growing up, in the civilizing and cultivating sense of the phrase "grow up," so that in the final stage of life we must actively learn to preserve our integrity, and our sense of a wholeness larger than our ourselves. In Erik Erikson's scheme of the stages of human life, our early years are devoted to identity, who we are; our middle years are dedicated to productivity, creativity, and sharing our leadership; and the last stage of life is the challenge of integrity versus despair, drift,



indifference, and self-hate. In this last phase money and power and things and status are less important than coming to full terms with life itself in the face of death itself. This integration of self is an acceptance of what is and what must be, a possessing of love and wisdom larger than oneself, and achieving a spiritual sense that looks through death: that is the challenge of the aging process with which we all would wish to learn to cope, and to control.

This is hardly a new idea, we know from one of the bitterest lessons taught us in all of western literature. In the foolish vanity of power in old age, King Lear gives his kingdom to his false daughters and exiles his true one. From the height of power and pomp he is degraded into a naked, pitiful madman, a "poor bare forked creature". In the dark night of his soul, he cries out, praying to the gods:

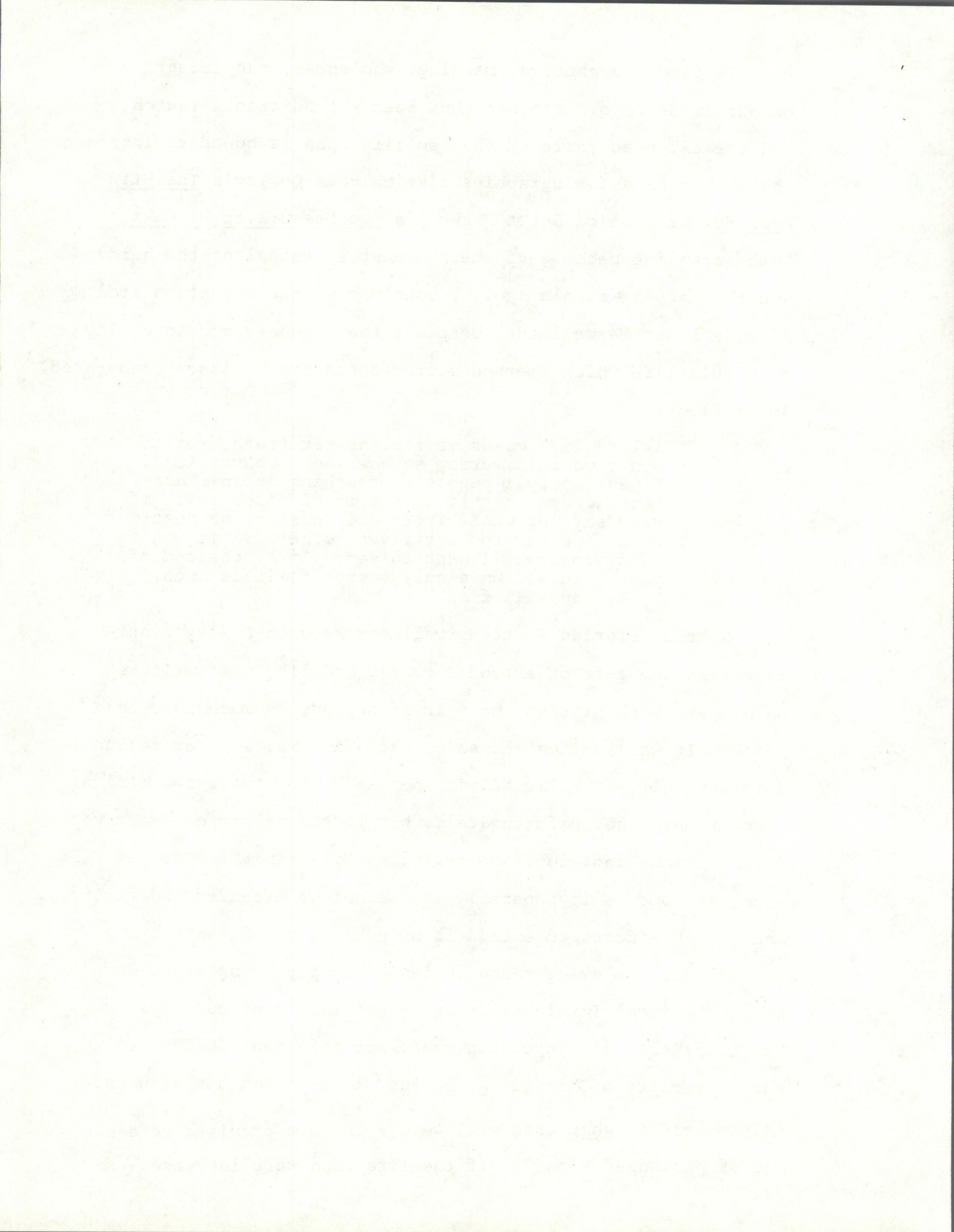
O heavens,
 If you do love old men, if your sweet sway
 Allow obedience; if you yourselves are old,
 Make it your cause; send down, and take my part.
 (II, IV, 189-92)

In the end Lear comes to integrity out of despair, to the humbling sense of having wronged as being wronged. Old age, among other things, Shakespeare tells us in King Lear, is not the limit of the human state but its truth; old age is the condition for understanding, self-illumination, wisdom, integrity.

To find the pattern, meaning, wholeness, the integrity of our lives in old age has thus been a traditional search, and the extended years of the new life span is bound to increase the number of autobiographies like Malcolm Cowley's The View From 80, or Florida Scott-Maxwell's The Measure of My Days, both appealing because of their honest appraisal of the burdens and the harvest of old age. I conclude with a quotation from Florida Scott-Maxwell that bespeaks the calmness and integrity of a full life which Emerson mirrored and Erik Erikson elaborated. She reflects,

"A long life makes me feel nearer truth, yet it won't go into words, so how can I convey it? I want to tell people approaching and perhaps fearing age that it is a time of discovery. If they say, of what? I can only answer, we must each find out for ourselves, otherwise it won't be discovery. I want to say, 'If at the end of your life you have only yourself, it is much.' Look, you will find."

Neither Florida Scott-Maxwell nor Malcolm Cowley sentimentalize the gift of extended years, and like most writers on old age both express the fear of dependence much more than death. It was Berlioz who said that "Time was a great teacher; unfortunately, it kills all its pupils." No, these two modern sages remark, not unfortunately, but fortunately; for death too is the human condition. Mortality has its limits. Our new life span, welcome as it generally is, cannot be extended indefinitely. And indeed efforts to extend it by even 10 to 20 years by so-called age-slowing technologies currently being studied by the National Institute on Aging are very dubious, says Dr. Leon Kass, distinguished professor of human biology at the University of Chicago (AS, Spring, 1983). And his argument is simple: of what then will we die in that promised golden age of prolonged vigor? "If the life span were increased--say

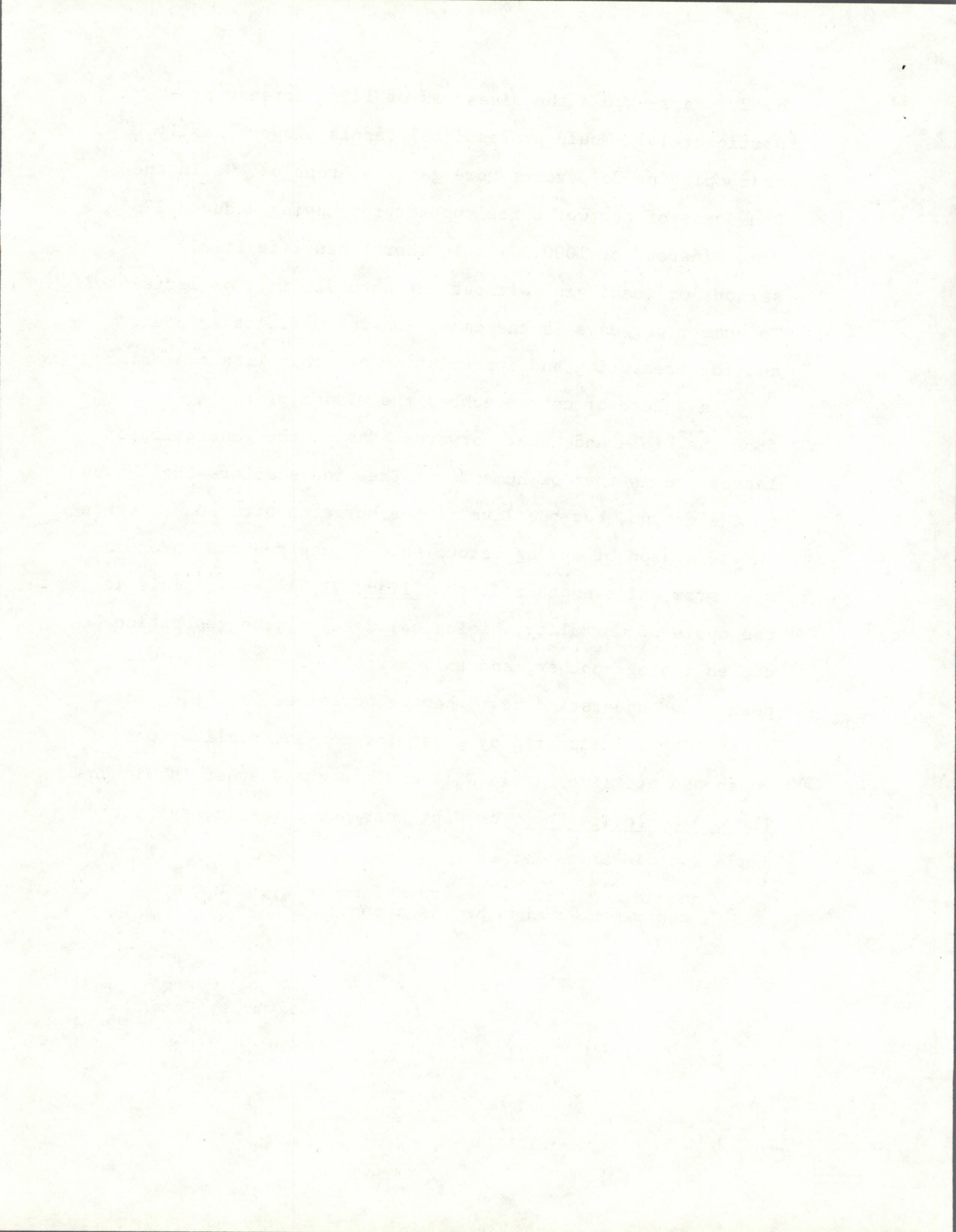


by 20 years--would the pleasures of life increase proportionately? Would professional tennis players really enjoy playing 25 percent more games of tennis? Would the Don Juans of our world feel better for having seduced 1250 women instead of 1000? ... In short, can life itself be serious or meaningful without the natural limit of mortality? To number our days is the condition for making them count and for treasuring and appreciating all that life can bring " (183)

Kass here of course echoes the wisdom of the ages, from the Bible and Homer forward: "As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity. The wind scatters the leaves to the ground, but the live timber burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning. So one generation of man will grow while another dies" (Iliad, VI, 146-50). This is the cycle of mortality, biological destiny, one generation replenishing another, and this miracle--for it is such--perhaps we understand best when we ourselves take the measure of our days, instructed by great imaginative realizations of youth and age like Little Nell and her grandfather in Dickens' The Old Curiosity Shop, or King Lear and Cordelia, or little Eppie and old Silas Marner.

The old dog barks backward and doesn't get up;
I can remember when he was a pup.

For the Kit Kat Club
Columbus, Ohio
October 21, 1986



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