

Productive Aging

■ Concept of Productive Aging

I had an occasion to introduce the concept of productive aging. I had been asked to chair a major seminar in Salzburg, Austria, to devote our session to dependency and long-term care. But it seemed to me wiser at that time to turn the topic upside down and to look at the more positive, productive aspects of aging. And by productivity, I meant not only paid productivity but unpaid, voluntary activity to one's family, to the community and even to one's self.

Health promotes productivity, and productivity, in turn, promotes health throughout life. This issue arises both in a historic and a contemporary context. Our societies and all the industrialized world has been transformed by an extraordinary increase in average life expectancy in excess of 25 years in less than a century, nearly equal to what had been attained in the preceding 5,000 years of human history. But we have also seen not only an increase in the number of vigorous and healthy older persons but unfortunately the rise of the minority who are significantly impaired, the bedridden in Japan, the frail, bed-fast and home-fast in the United States. These provide a specter of rising social and health costs.

■ Right to Work Throughout Life

In 1982, I was asked to testify before Alan Greenspan, who is now the head of our Federal Reserve, our Central Bank. He was then the Chairman of the President Reagan's National Commission on Social Security Reform. The

challenge given to me was to explain why, since we have had an increase in life expectancy, there should not be a commensurate increase in work expectancy.

In the United States when Social Security was passed in 1935, the average life expectancy of a male was less than 60 and of a female about 62. The average life expectancy gain since the passage of Social Security has been considerable, now nearly 70 for men and nearly 80 for women. So again, the question in Alan Greenspan's mind as Chairman of the Commission is, why shouldn't we elevate the retirement age and the eligibility age for Social Security?

But you may well ask, isn't retirement a hard-won, earned right of all of us as working people? Yes, it is true. But in the United States now, the average retirement period can be 20 years. Is that healthy for the individual? Is it socially wise? Is it economically sound? I am not proposing that we have forced labor. However, I do think that mandatory retirement which was a modern aberration, a modern development, will be brought to an end throughout the world, and has been virtually brought to an end in the United States.

As a consequence of the U.S. Age Discrimination in Employment Act first passed in 1967, and a series of amendments, the most recent in 1988, required or mandated retirement has been virtually brought to an end. It was interesting that the advance of this legislation was in the hands of the oldest member of our Congress at that time, the late Claude Pepper, and

was signed into law by our country's oldest ever President, Ronald Reagan.

When the concept of age discrimination in employment first arose, it was largely thought of in terms of a civil right. That is, each of us should have the opportunity to earn our own living throughout our entire life and not be denied that opportunity on the basis of age, but rather on the basis of competence or function. It was a civil rights issue and that was the way I tried to describe it in a chapter in my book "Why Survive" in 1975, the chapter devoted to the right to work.

The Government Accounting Office of the United States made a modest estimate that perhaps some 200,000 persons over 70 would stay in the workforce as a result of the Age Discrimination Law. As we look into the next century, we may imagine even greater numbers. Also, our government made calculations of significant savings in the millions because older persons would remain more active and less dependent.

■ Solutions for Worker Shortage

There are 3 great demographic issues that affect contemporary societies. First, there is the issue of immigration. The second issue is the birth rate crisis. The third issue is the extraordinary explosive cultural, ethnic, religious, indeed even theocratic nationalism.

How can we deal with a worker shortage if it is indeed before us? First is the manipulation of the birth rates. France provides for a child allowance, and Sweden has recently increased

parental leave. However, efforts toward manipulation or encouragement of increased births are difficult. We are witnessing the extraordinarily interesting and changing lives of women. The second variable is immigration. Our most recent immigration law has actually encouraged skilled workers with special arrangements. It has also made it possible for those who actually bring money into the country, or make investments, to have an opportunity to enter. There have been remarkable changes in our immigration laws intended to foster, productivity and to introduce further skills and manipulate the worker shortage. But the third possibility for altering the worker shortage is productive aging, as well as concomitant, novel arrangements in both work time and work place. Flex time makes it possible for working men and women to share in childcare, the care of older persons in a family or care of disabled members of a family, and still be able to work. Parental leave will also influence the character of the work place.

■ Effects of Silver Industries

I think Japan has been very special in its identification of the silver industries. This is really a new market, an extraordinary example of free market capitalism.

The silver industries then include insurance, financial institutions, pension funds, the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries, the technology, prosthetic and robotic industries, transportation, new housing arrangements, leisure, recreation and travel. All of these provide



opportunities for new services, new products, new markets and, indeed a huge market, with a growing group of consumers. Of course, these customers can themselves remain productive, and by being productive, earn incomes that make possible the consumption of goods and services.

■ Scientific Understanding of Longevity

In the United States, this decade has been identified as the Decade of the Brain. This is an effort to mobilize the flourishing neurosciences, or better understanding of neuro-chemicals which are the regulators and senders of messages from one nerve cell to another. The application of the new biology to central nervous system functioning is likely to lead to the end of the dementias which have been such a frightening specter. To all of us, the thought of losing our minds, being unable to recognize our loved ones, our friends, to not be able to think, terrifies and discourages us. But I think it is reasonable to assume that, with the contributions of worldwide science and the pharmaceutical and the bio-technology industries, we will see a great breakthrough in dealing with the dementias.

■ Roles of Social Service Centers

But along with research must always come action. Could it be that Japan and the United States might take a leading role in the development of new imaginative efforts of voluntary activity, such as the Social Service Center? Also, to the degree to which our societies have not lost sight of the wisdom and other gifts associated with age, we

need institutes for scholars, for those who have been made emeritus or retired from the world of science, history and scholarship. Can we capitalize on those natural functions to teach, to mentor and sponsor young people, to not lose the great gifts of craftsmanship and the arts? Japan has the marvelous concept of "living treasures." We dare not lose these people. We must support them and continue to profit from them.

■ Problems Related to Productive Aging

I hope that I have not suggested that any transformation to productive aging will come easily. There are problems. In the United States in the 1980s, we saw downsizing of corporations, sweeteners to encourage better financed early retirement. But as James Burke (CEO and President of Johnson and Johnson) suggested, this may be a short time saving measure, but a long time disaster.

The second issue is, if people remain in the workforce longer, will they take jobs away from young people? The International Labor Office (ILO), in its studies has found that the continuing participation of older persons in the paid workforce does not measurably reduce opportunities for younger workers.

Another problem related to productive aging is the rich possibilities that come from transfer from one job to another. In the United States, new laws have made increasingly possible the portability of pensions and the opportunity of moving from one job to another. In fact, in the U.S., we now have average 6 jobs and 3 careers for an individual.

But supposing these worker shortages come to an end, the state should provide assurance to workers should they be displaced because of technological obsolescence or structural cycle, or even counter-cyclical activity. After all, workers before us helped create the infrastructure upon which each of us has been able to build. Having such a reformed unemployment fund would be a dignified and quite different response from one regarding workers as redundant or surplus in times of unemployment. As I see it at the moment, this is not an issue in Japan or in the United States. But it is, I think, necessary when formulating possible changes in a society, to think through all of the possible scenarios.

■ Longevity Revolution as Philosophy

We need a full participation society wherever that society might be, in the United States or Japan. Whether voluntary or paid, we really cannot afford passivity, the enemy of energy and creativity. There is really no shortage of work to be done. The issue is not a shortage of work. The issue is our human skill in the organization of work and the creating of niches called jobs or voluntary activities.

I do not see productive aging as a matter of sentimentality, but a matter of tough economic good sense. We simply must have productive societies; in their absence we cannot support anything, education, health and growth. We also need purpose in our individual lives. Here we have this new gift of some 25 years of additional life expectancy. What do we do with it?

Perhaps this is a special opportunity for our 2 societies to explore the great contributions of eastern philosophy, thinking and spirituality and its contrast with western civilization.

■ Conclusion

I see this longevity revolution as a sea of change, an extraordinary transforming social event. This new longevity was not a consequence of biological evolution, but a consequence of social progress, of worldwide importance. When one confronts such a major transforming social and historical process, we need new mind sets. We live longer. We must work longer. We must contribute to our own life and not just depend on others.

I hope that through our International Leadership Center on Longevity and Society, through our energetic appreciation of the common good, our 2 societies will continue to work closely together. It seems to me we must work closely together, to do all we can to become major innovators and leaders that will help other societies to recognize how to meet the positive reality of the new longevity. Although productive aging is only one element in that response, it is, I think, an important element that I hope all of us will give thought to.