

'Third Age' offers promise of new opportunities in life

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In the United States today, we have 22-year-old mayors, 35-year-old grandmothers, 55-year-old retirees, and 80-year-old college students. These realities are changing the images that many of us have about aging.

Each of us has a point of view about growing old, made up of all the images we possess about later life. Many of these impressions were formed during our childhood, based on our experiences and on the models we received from our grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, and friends. These impressions shape our image of how aging will affect us in our own future.

If — as our culture tends to promote — the entire purpose of aging is to be just like we were when we were young, what is the value of that? Should the primary goal of childhood be an attempt to remain an infant as long as possible? Is prolonging adolescence for a few more years the purpose of young adulthood? Should the focus of late adulthood be a longing for youth?

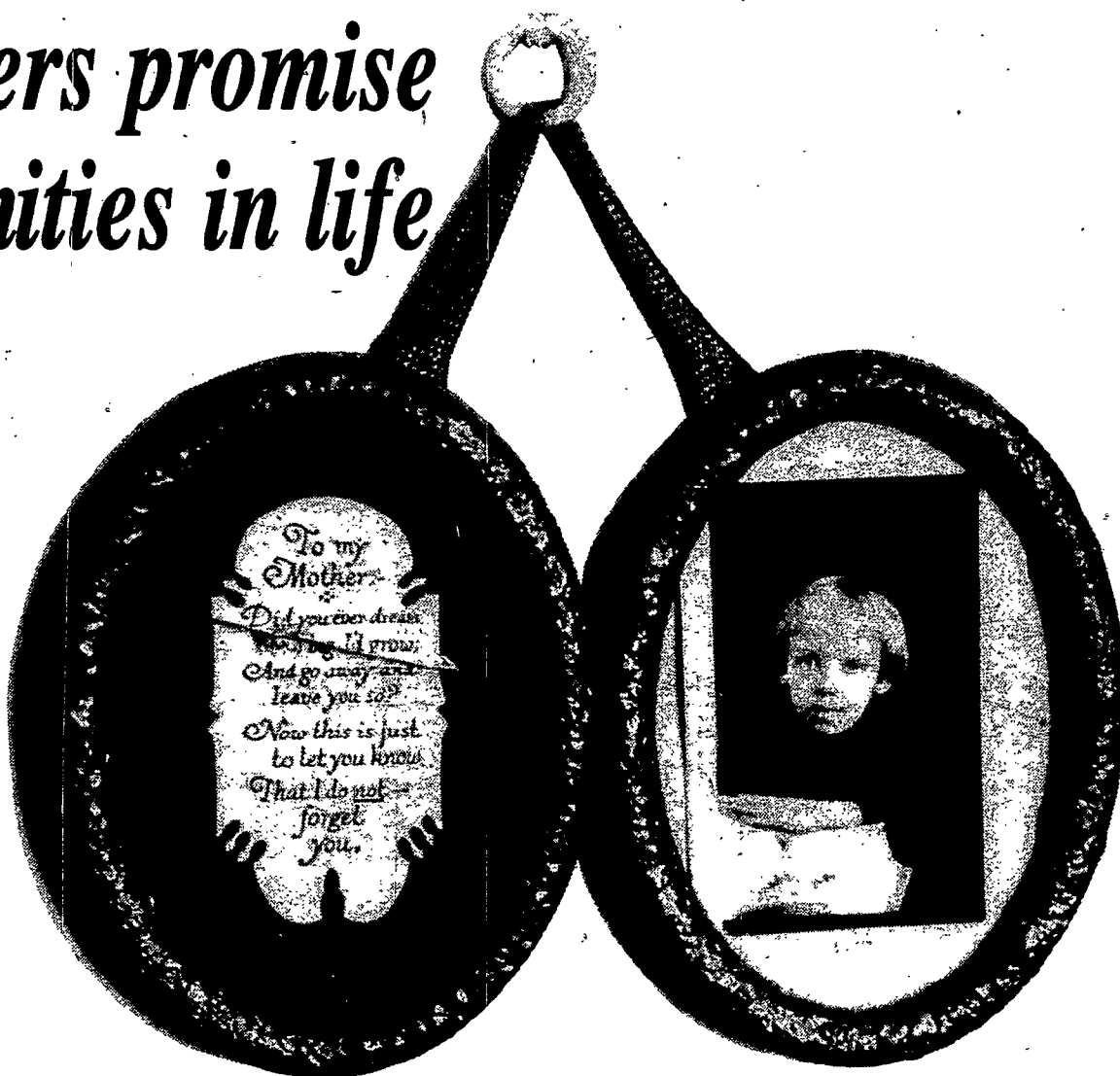
We think not.

Special human qualities and abilities exist that can only come to full blossom with age. We gain mature wisdom; strength of faith; experience of life; the possibility of seasoned leadership; and the ability to give back to society and church the lessons and resources that have been harvested over a lifetime.

The older members of our society are the pioneers of this new phenomenon of aging. They have adjusted to more change than any other generation in history. They have experienced numerous technological advances, ranging from an age with no radios to that of talking to people on the moon; from riding horse and buggy to jetting across the ocean in less than four hours. Their long lives testify to major changes in health care.

They are the survivors, having lived through two World Wars and having survived the Great Depression. Although they have lost spouses, sons and daughters, they have accepted life and death without falling apart. Now they need to be encouraged to accept the changes within themselves. They need to find new ways to serve, to be supported, and to bless others with their wisdom and experience.

Mindful of this rich experience, Henri Nouwen, a well-known theologian, defined aging as "the gradual fulfillment of the life cycle, in which receiving life matures into giving, and living makes dying worthwhile. Aging does not need to be denied or



A portrait of Alice Servas when she was 6-years-old hangs in her mother's bedroom at the Servas' home in Greece.

hidden, but can be understood, affirmed, and experienced as a process of growth, in which the mystery of life is slowly revealed to us."

Aging does not begin at 65. It is a process that begins at birth and ends with death. When a child reaches the age of 10, he or she has grown older, just as a person of 80 has continued to grow during a long life of experience.

People do not cross a boundary and suddenly "become old;" the bench mark of age 65 was chosen as a criterion for social security in 1935 because then it was thought that most people would not live much beyond that age. There is no particular age when people cease being individuals, with the full range of human characteristics, and instead become one group labeled "old people." As people age, they retain and indeed enhance their own individuality.

More of us are growing older together than ever before, and the impact of our collective aging will change every facet of our society in the coming years. As Ken Dychtwald said in his book, entitled *Age Wave*, "It is likely that we will age more slowly than did members of previous generations, with better health, energy, dynamism, and future direction.



Alice Seil, 95, who now lives with her daughter, Alice, takes a moment to reflect on her 69-year marriage to Maurand Seil.

Life extension will allow many more people to live to be 100 and even to 120. And as science learns more about the aging process, we will be able to take advantage of the continual discovery of new drugs, foods, therapies, and health programs that will cause our bodies to age at a slower pace."

The focus on the child-centered nuclear family will shift to an adult-centered family bound together by friendship and choice as well as by blood and obligation. Today, we already have four- and five-generation families, with 10 percent of our senior citizens having sons and daughters who are also senior citizens. Along with this, there are 70-year-old men and women caring for 90-year-old parents.

Dychtwald went on to describe the changing environment in which we will live: everything will be re-designed to accommodate the majority of our population as they enter the middle and later years of life.

"The typefaces in books will get larger and traffic lights will change more slowly; colors will be more predominantly yellow, red, and orange instead of blues and greens; steps will be lower, furniture more comfortable, and reading lights brighter and glare-free," Dychtwald said.



Some of the Servas' eight children at Mother's Day breakfast.



Carl Servas tickles granddaughter Allison Toscano after breakfast while grandmother Seil attends to some other children.

Another phenomenon, according to Dychtwald, is that we may never retire or we may retire several times. We may stop working one or more times between 40 and 60 in order to go back to school, a second (or third) family, enter a new business, simply to take a couple of years to travel, or even 80s, and continue to take up new challenges many times in our lives.

In our culture, we have considered just these phases in our life span.

The "First Age" is the phase of dependence, learning, from birth through adolescence, when we are cared for as children and preparing for the next period of our lives.

The "Second Age" is the phase of independence, autonomy and changing relationships. During this phase, a person makes several major mental choices: what to do in life, what to have, where to live, and, for many, whom to marry and how many children to have.

In the past, many people — especially in undeveloped countries — would die before the age of life was completed.

Now we must consider a third phase in our life span.

The "Third Age" is a time of giving back to society the lessons, resources and experiences accumulated over a lifetime.

Dychtwald said of the third age, "With children grown and many of life's basic needs either well under way or already accomplished, the less-pressured, more reflective period allows for further development of the interior life of intellect, memory, imagination, of emotional growth and of one's own personal sense of spirituality."

The third age may be a period of 20 to 30 years.



Alice Servas holds granddaughter, Allison Toscano, who is 5-months-old, after Mother's Day Mass at Our Lady of Mercy Church in Greece. Toscano is one of 19 grandchildren who regularly visit Servas.

Courier photos
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