

Novescence

— *starting up, not shutting down*

by

©Gwen McCauley and Cathy Carmody

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Introduction

Some time ago we began our journey into the broad field that is called conscious aging, a growing 21st century phenomenon addressing the needs and expectations of a population aging differently than all previous generations have. For us, conscious aging is about each of us as individuals waking up, claiming our intellectual, social, cultural and personal needs as adults and crafting a plan for our future that brings meaning and purpose to our lives, regardless of the personal limitations we may have felt we had at earlier stages in life.

We began our search by asking questions to help us to understand and make sense of this emerging new order as the world enters a different reality around the broadly based aging of populations everywhere.

The search was stimulated by a joint realization, as specialists in the field of human growth and evolution, that our personal experiences of the aging process were wildly divergent than those of our older siblings, our parents, and our grandparents.

Retirement held little interest for either of us. Both of us are still mentally and physically engaged in the world and want that to continue for the foreseeable future. We are still excited about the possibilities and potential for our futures and sure as heck don't feel old, despite qualifying for Old Age Pension, seniors discounts galore, sporting our fair share of wrinkles, sun spots and other physical evidence suggesting the bloom of youth had passed.

As we explored and talked with others it became clear we were not alone in our response to rejecting aging in the “traditional” way.

We began to accept that our experience represents the leading edge of a massive change occurring in virtually all industrialized nations (and soon to become a reality in developing nations). Not only are we individually expecting to live longer and with more vigor and health than our parents did, but collectively, we share this experience with a vast cohort.

More than two decades ago demographers like Peter Laslett¹ noted that for the first time in human history the proportion of older people in the population had

¹ Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991)

reached a tipping point. And, he argued, this wasn't just a short-term, single generation shift related to the impact of the "baby boom" generation. No, it was a structural population shift which will be present for and affect many generations to come.

Canada is aging; North America is aging; Europe is aging; all parts of the world will soon join us in this apparently inexorable march into aging created because we are living longer, we are having fewer babies at older ages than previous generations and because fewer of us are dying young in life.

Surprisingly, few seem to have noticed how profound this shift is. As we read various authors, scoured the web, watched videos and documentaries, it appeared everyone else was looking at this structural phenomenon as a short-term blip representing the impact of the baby boom generation, that post World War II population surge cohort that seems to have profoundly affected world culture. Few academics, researchers, government policy makers, politicians, social scientists or philosophers seem to be aware of the fact that the entire population of the industrial world is sitting on the edge of a population shift of profound proportion and potential long-term impact. How can this be, we wonder?

Most of the time the conversation is limited to discussing alternative views of retirement, as if 'retirement' or finding new ways of 'being retired' is the only thing you can do once you reach a certain age. Nobody seems to be asking: is it time to retire the idea of 'retirement' as THE accepted way of growing old? Is it time to redefine our historical view of aging and what is possible for vast cohorts of people as they age?

The Need for a New Life Stage

We believe there is a new life stage developing before our eyes, whether you can see it or not.

It is emerging by virtue of increased longevity, improved health, changing technologies, changing attitudes, decreasing entitlements, people's increased vitality for staying engaged in a variety of pursuits, and a growing recognition that there is significant potential for personal growth and life possibility after people reach 65.

This new life stage isn't just about defining a new demographic group; it is about recognizing there's a whole generation of people who have different development needs than previous generations.

The need for a new life stage has been most rigorously explored and established in England over twenty years ago by Peter Laslett, a British historical demographer. In his book *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age*

he passionately argues for the need of a new life stage that will impact not only our current crop of aging boomers but all subsequent generations of humans.

However, Laslett is certainly far from alone in his call for a new life stage, although he certainly is the visionary with the data that compellingly argues the need for this new life stage. Amongst others, Theodore Roszak, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Susanne Braun Levine, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Mary Catherine Bateson have all documented the need, have all acknowledged that we no longer jump directly from our middle years to being 'old', although it appears that a major stumbling block for everyone has been selecting a compelling name for this new stage. Laslett seems to be the only thinker who has clearly documented the future implications of this emerging trend on the world stage.

In the last decade or two there has been growing pressure to acknowledge that this vast cohort of people called The Baby Boom will engage aging differently than our predecessors. It is widely acknowledged that we will change the cultural landscape of aging, just like we've changed many earlier things as we've moved through them. If there isn't strength in numbers, there certainly is pressure in numbers.

As Marc Freedman² argues, it is becoming more urgent that attention be placed on developing what the idea of a new developmental life stage might be, what it might look like. Laslett points out, we have now reached the point where some 25 percent of the population is beyond age 60 and this will remain a demographic status quo for generations to come.

We have seen the need and we call it 'novescence'.

Novescence as a new life stage is comparable to the introduction of 'adolescence' as a developmental life stage in response to societal changes at the beginning of the 20th century. We identify novescence as a developmental stage occurring between the ages of 55 and 85 years of age. People may enter novescence earlier or later in their individual growth cycles, but we believe that it is a stage of development that is necessary and overdue to allow people, and society, to live in accordance with today's demands and expectations, rather than remaining stuck in the models that worked for earlier generations.

Adolescence as a human development life stage was created in 1904 by G. Stanley Hall in response to the dire need to give children a chance to have some time to grow up. It followed the rapid urbanization of society and reflected a new social reality. Previously, rural children became adults almost overnight. But in the cities, youth had a period of growth where they were too young to work yet too old to be considered children. 'Adolescence' became the time period where they learned how to grow into adulthood.

² Marc Freedman *The Big Shift: Navigating the New Stage Beyond Midlife* (New York:Public Affairs/Perseus. 2011)

Senescence was another G. Stanley Hall life stage creation. Long before others, Hall realized that longer lifespans, the exit from work, and narrowing family roles were opening up a gap in people's lives. He recognized that lives that had no meaning or purpose constituted a great loss to society. He called that period 'senescence'. Since Hall's time, however, senescence has come to be a term used to describe the slowing down and withdrawal that happens in 'old age'. Remember, at the time that Hall was writing people tended to rapidly move from active physical robustness into the decline we frequently associate with physical old age, just like children became adults almost overnight. While that rapid physical aging process may still exist, it certainly no longer occurs with regularity among people still in their 60's. In today's world, it happens much later chronologically.

The answers we find from a new enquiry on aging may hold significant implications for shaping our thinking of what's possible for our individual lives as we grow older. As well, new thinking also suggests alternative and innovative public policy solutions to deal with the potential socio-economic and political impacts of a continuing 'older aged' industrialized population.

We contend novescence begins at approximately age 55, largely because so many groups, institutions, social scientists, governments, and marketers tend to begin to define seniors as those who are "55+." Many 'early retirement' plans, especially in unionized environments such as Canada's forestry sector, are seeing a strong workforce exodus around age 55.

We use age 85 as the end of novescence because we hear of many individuals who continue to be actively engaged in life, whether through paid meaningful work, volunteerism, or otherwise who remain vibrant, active and engaged in life until well beyond the age of 80.

Why a New Developmental Stage?

We've concluded that it is time to find a name that fits in with how we currently talk about human development stages. A name that is catchy enough to be used with little effort or explanation. A name that fits in with an already existing model of how human growth is defined seems both useful and practical.

Novescence is a concept that stretches our thinking well beyond traditionally held ideas about the aging process. It has now become very common for the kind of 'old age' we assumed was true for most 60 or 65 year olds to be postponed well into the eighth decade of life.

What was thought impossible for people getting older just a couple of decades ago is rapidly becoming the new normal. It has become commonplace to assume older people can remain physically well, hale and hearty, and intellectually

vibrant and capable of contributing in ways we considered exceptional a short time ago.

Historically, most people were required to work physically hard all their lives. Most didn't have access to the health and dental services. Most didn't have ready access to good food and nutrition we now take for granted. For the fortunate few who reached the age of 60 or 65 in earlier times, the body was worn out and in decline.

The industrialized world today has a staggering number of aging workers who have had the benefit of improved diet, improved medicine, and a shift to working with their brains not their backs. This represents new waves of people and potential which must be re-contextualized. Instead of simply accepting the eventuality and adjustment to retirement from active living, we can choose to acknowledge to ourselves that once past 55 there is a whole new developmental process open for us to engage in.

Why 'novescence' you might ask? We chose novescence as the term best suited to this new stage of life because the Latin root word "novo" means to make anew, refresh, revive, change, alter, invent, all the functional development processes as we shift slowly from mid-life into true old age. Since social scientists already accept and use "adolescence" (from the Latin *to grow*) and "senescence" (from the Latin *to deteriorate with age*), it seemed appropriate to develop a term in keeping with the naming tradition that our predecessor G. Stanley Hall so elegantly gave us.

In fact, one can look at the continuum of human life as a series of developmental stages, each one an opportunity for us to become more, to expand upon those already engaged and experienced. Figure 1 proposes such a view of the human condition called life. Based on Hall's terminology, we can easily see a flow from one stage to the other, our thoughts of Novescence as a necessary and viable life stage part of a much broader continuum that presumes and presupposes that all humans are here to live the biological imperative: grow or die.

We don't seek to defend or justify the specific terms we've used in Figure 1, but rather to present them as a more holistic way of viewing life, with Novescence as our contribution to the science of what it means to be human.

Stages of Human Growth & Development		
0-10	Juvescence	Becoming a human: motor skills, language, building identity
10-25	Adolescence	Becoming an adult: socialization, social identity, getting along
25-55	Mediescence	Living our mid-life: career, family, community
55-85	Novescence	Aging Consciously: creating a new life for our future
85-??	Senescence	'Old Age': gradual withdrawal; actively preparing for the end

Figure 1

Novescence presumes that our task, at this stage of life, is to begin to move beyond whatever limits we've set for ourselves in terms of education, work, social and family obligations. We each need to begin to consider how we can create a new future for the next 20 to 30 years before we'll actually become senescent or 'old'. This is the primary developmental task of this new stage of life.

What's fascinating about identifying a new developmental life stage is that it not only tips many of our current worldviews about the early stages of aging upside down, it also invites us to begin imagining how this prolonged period of vitality and vibrancy will impact future generations.

Consider for a moment those currently in their 20s, who may face a work life lasting until age 85. As opposed to our experience of having a one or two career work life, upcoming generations may be faced with stretching their lives out in segments of 10 to 15 years, where educational renewal and redirection is interspersed with periods of active work. The anxiety many young people currently feel over finding permanent jobs and careers may dissipate as they begin to realize they have plenty of time and room to have a multitude of careers, jobs, work and life experiments during their lifetime.

Post-secondary education may become something one does intermittently throughout life as opposed to being a primary focus of the 20s. Future young people may do serial jobs of 10 years or so before obtaining more learning and then launching into a whole new sphere of work. In fact, a lot are doing that already.

In the new world of life and work, as we approach 55, the novescence life stage opens up for us. It becomes a time for reflection, a time to turn inward for guidance as opposed to looking around us for experts to tell us what to do with our lives. It becomes a time to renew, replenish and to consider vastly new possibilities for what the next two to three decades might offer us.

Novescence can become a time for profound change, a time for the invention of new lives, a time for leaving the old behind - such as the old titles which described what we used to do and who we used to be. Novescence is a time for letting fresh air into our lives and inviting in dreams about who we want to become in this next life of stage. While we may not have the same physical bodies we used to, we will have, if we choose, more insight about ourselves and who we can become – perhaps latching onto those things we tossed aside long ago because we didn't perceive them as possible or valued by society. Novescence can be the time to create newly crafted dreams from long lost ideas of our youth.

One example of the limitless potential of humans, is that of Charles Ballard who, having worked for 35 years in the banking industry, left at age 60 and, with new possibilities in mind, went to college where he trained as a nurse and found employment in a children's hospital. This happened over 25 years ago. Charles certainly was a pioneer in the process of novescence.

Another is Mamy Rock, a 73 year old British woman, who because of her life long love for music, quite by accident became enthralled by the role and joy of life brought out by the modern day disc jockey. She has emerged as an internationally recognized disc jockey adored by millions! The possibilities are endless.

We know it is just a matter of time before our institutions, social norms, and societal expectations around aging will begin to shift dramatically. We wonder when governments and social policy creators will wake up to the realization the world has changed and will continue to change not only because of technological inventions but because of human inventiveness. As well, so many organizations have yet to realize the latent potential of their older workers, continuing instead to do as much as they can to release them at 55, with the hope that younger workers will cost less and be more productive.

When will we shift from seeing aging as only about senescence, decline and decrepitude, and come to see aging as a time of creativeness, grace, resilience and contribution? Just about the time that we accept that novescence is a vital new phase of human development we suspect.

Gwen McCauley is a catalytic life transition coach, author and culinary tour guide. Gwen develops new models for thinking about human potential, works with individuals seeking to actively pursue a novescent life and promotes human creativity wherever possible. Gwen's passion is to help people live their best life, regardless of age. www.gwenmccauley.ca

Cathy Carmody is a visionary in the field of aging consciously. Cathy believes passionately that the choices and behaviors that carry us through life are all driven by the beliefs that one holds. Change your beliefs: Change your life! Speaker, workshop facilitator and author, Cathy is widely sought out by those searching for new approaches to perceived 'problem of aging'. www.cathycarmody.com