

Jane Fonda Redefining Age: A Legacy of Challenging Paradigms
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Abstract: This paper aims to capture the legacy of the American actress and activist Jane Fonda from a particular perspective: her attempt to revolutionize the conventional paradigm of aging in her publications *Prime Time: Love, Health, Sex, Fitness, Friendship, Spirit: Making the Most of All of Your Life* (2011), which lie at the heart of this research. When synthesized, the book offers a paradigm shift in redefining the common narrative of aging, from one dominated by decline – symbolized as the arch – to the metaphorical use of the staircase as a path that celebrates growth.

Keywords: Jane Fonda, *Prime Time*, the arch, the staircase, aging mindfully, identity, generativity, spirituality

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Introduction: Beyond the Arch

From Lady Jane to the Sex Queen, facing the tumultuous 1970s as Hanoi Jane, and ultimately sculpting herself into the Fitness Guru of the 1980s, Jane Fonda, the iconic and most radical woman in Hollywood, has been known to be on a never-ending mission to redefine herself. One might assume such a pursuit stems from her profound awareness of the natural rhythm and flow of life. A process wherein she embodies every aspect of her identity as she gracefully embraces the passage of time. In light of her remarkable journey of self-reinvention and resilience, this paper aims to encapsulate Jane Fonda's legacy through a specific lens: her quest to redefine the traditional paradigm of age. Fonda suggests a shift from a perspective that is dominated by decrepitude and fear to one that celebrates growth, wisdom, and the richness of life's journey.

Through a mix of personal stories and practical advice in *Prime Time: Love, Health, Sex, Fitness, Friendship, Spirit, Making the Most of Your Life*, Fonda presents more than just a typical self-help guide; I believe she offers an integrative paradigm consisting of interrelated maxims uniting theories across various disciplines to bring a coherent understanding of the process of aging. The first principle entails the practice of engaging in a life review where she draws extensively from the work of Robert Butler, a renowned gerontologist – proposing that through self-narration and reflection on past experiences one can embody their true self. The axiom underlying the second principle draws from the concept of Generativity – a term coined by the German-American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson – with a primary focus on guiding the future generation. The third principle is explained by the concept of the Omega Point, which was first proposed by French Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose work Jane Fonda employs to speak of spirituality.

Although *Jane Fonda's Workout Book* (1981), marked the beginning of her writing career, Fonda launched her research in the field of aging when “Nature began having its way” with her in the years approaching her mid-40s (Fonda 1984, 11). In an attempt to understand the complexities of this phenomenon –the challenges, myths, and opportunities that come with it– she explored her experiences as a woman growing up in the 1950s and brought forth *Women Coming of Age* (1984). This exploration laid the groundwork for her later memoir *My Life So Far* (2005) which further delves into the intricacies of her life's journey. Her autobiography was saluted by *The Times* for its “honest intelligence,” a trait often missing from Hollywood autobiographies (Truss 2005). Her willingness to expose herself authentically sets this book apart from other autobiographies where she provides a rich source of compassion and empathy into the intricacies of advanced age by disclosing her most personal experiences. Through her portrayal of the ever-changing nature of life, she offers valuable insights that illuminate the challenges and nuances of the aging process. However, it was not until her early 70s, that she unveiled a visionary concept in *Prime Time* (2011). A model whose pillars have the potential to catalyze a paradigm shift in the narrative of aging.

Prime Time falls into the category of self-improvement, and inspiration while also being part autobiographical as Fonda draws from her own life experiences. She attempts to offer a comprehensive guide on various aspects of life “...[t]o help people realize the potential of their later decades” (*Publisher Weekly* 2011). There are five sections in this book, each providing a special examination of different life stages and the challenges and triumphs that go along with them. She explores the pervasiveness of internalized sexism and its effects on people's views

and experiences at many stages of life, starting in early childhood and continuing into old age. In addition, she presents her research on conducting a life review in this section and explores its profound influence on her life. In the Second Part, she explores the subtleties of the mental and physical changes that come with becoming older, illuminating how viewpoints and attitudes change with time. Moreover, Fonda highlights the lasting value of intimacy and relationships in the lives of older individuals, emphasizing how crucial these aspects are to one's well-being. Her resounding call for elderly active engagement in shaping the future generation resonates strongly in the Third Part where she incorporates the insights of Erikson and explores generativity by weaving his theories into her narrative of aging. Finally, Fonda delves into the domain of spirituality and existential reflection and references the Omega Point by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. However, her discussion in this part remains limited. One may assume it is due to the sensitive and thin line between spirituality and religion. She values the freedom to choose one's own spiritual path greatly, and it may be claimed that this is the reason she agrees with Teilhard's viewpoint since he prioritizes spirituality towards a collective consciousness above religious dogma.

The entirety of the book centers on two diagrams designed by Rudolf Arnheim, which serve as the cornerstone for Fonda's paradigm shift. Born in Germany, Arnheim was a prominent psychologist, philosopher, and film theorist who taught at Harvard University (Fox 2007). To provide opposing viewpoints about late-style art, he presents two diagrams, 'the arch' and 'the staircase' in the context of human life in *New Essays on the Psychology of Arts* (1986). The arch represents the biological framework of human life, one that spans from birth to a pinnacle of maturity in midlife and descends towards fragility and decline. From Arnheim's point of view, the arch aligns with the prevalent and universal narrative of aging – a discourse that frequently depicts it not only as a time of physical decline but also as diminished productivity, and lack of agency; "...[t]he weakening of [...] the practical powers of the mind" (Arnheim 1986, 285). The staircase, however, complements the arch as it represents a path taken to evolve, leading to the acquisition of wisdom" (Arnheim 1986, 285). He showcased his illustration in *New Essays on The Psychology of Arts* in a chapter called "The Late Style:"

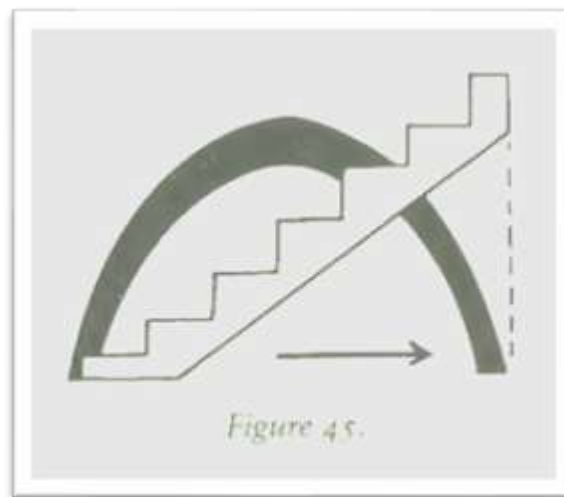


Figure 1. (Arnheim 1986, 285)

Arnheim's view of aging as an arch is consistent with a widespread societal narrative that is common in many cultures and is a familiar concept among scholars and researchers in the field of age studies. As a pioneer in gerontology, the Russian biologist, Ilya Ilyich Metchnikoff was intrigued by the complexities of human life and aging. His investigation of old age focused on the mechanism of senility and the problems it causes. The *Prolongation of Life: Optimistic Studies* (1908), has been considered a classic in age studies. With the impending

longevity revolution on the horizon, he viewed aging through an optimistic lens and emphasized the importance of human individuality for a healthy mindset in the later stages of life (Minot 1908). Metchnikoff made significant contributions to the field by challenging the prevalent belief of his time that considered age as a disease in need of a cure – a viewpoint similar to the arch. However, during his time, stereotypes related to aging lacked a formal denomination and remained nameless, until the 1960s, when the third great ‘-ism’ emerged.

The term Ageism was coined in 1969 by Robert Butler, the first director of the National Institute on Aging. Butler was able to draw parallels from the prevailing status quo of American society and called ageism “Another Form of Bigotry,” similar to racism and sexism (Butler 1969). He played a pivotal role in raising awareness about age discrimination as a significant social issue. In addition to Butler, other scholars – such as W. Andrew Achenbaum, Margaret Cruikshank, and Margaret Morganroth Gullette – have done extensive research on the construction of aging identities and have explored societal, cultural, and political aspects of aging along with the challenges and stereotypes often associated with it. They strive to raise awareness of the complex, multidimensional nature of the aging experience, by questioning the simplistic narrative that focuses solely on the physical decline.

These scholars collectively confront the flawed foundational principle of age theories which revolves around two assumptions that “decline is the narrative about aging,” and that “people are aged by culture” (Gullette 2017, 16). Margaret Morganroth Gullette – a cultural critic, social philosopher, and prominent scholar in the field of age studies – places significant emphasis on the social construction of aging, which means that people’s perceptions and experiences of aging are shaped by societal attitudes and beliefs. *Aged by Culture* (2004), one of her influential books, holds accountable not only Western cultures but also our internal dialogue that frames aging as a period of decline. (Cherry and Jamhour and Mincey 2004). Similar to Gullette, the American feminist writer, Margaret Cruikshank claims that what has become the acceptable narrative in American societies is ruled by the “paradigm of loss;” a period of diminishing capabilities and loss of various aspects of one’s identity and vitality (Cruikshank 2013). The paradigm of loss, is another indicator of social construction, highlighting how societal norms construct the perception of aging as a time of decline and deprivation.

Gullette and Cruikshank both believed that such a common narrative is too narrow a choice and does not consider the complexities of human experiences as one advances through age. In response to this limitation, Gullette proposed an alternative perspective in *Agewise* (2011); the “progress narrative,” a viewpoint that emphasizes how people develop, and improve over time (Gullette 2011, 154). This alternative perspective casts doubt on conventional notions of aging, by highlighting the constant evolution of humans. Her alternative narrative, depicting aging as a dynamic journey, provides a more nuanced framework for the later phases of life which aligns perfectly with Arnheim’s second metaphor, the staircase – a journey of personal transformation, and development accompanied by the acquisition of wisdom (Arnheim 1986, 258).

The staircase as the alternative metaphor to the arch, forms the foundation behind Fonda’s paradigm shift. She considers the years 45 to 50 and, more notably 60 as pivotal years for women to become the vibrant, content, and authentic people they are meant to be. Her transformative pathways toward an evolution in the portrayal of aging in *Prime Time* encourage a redefinition of the narrative. Unfortunately, Fonda’s book has not received the scholarly attention and critical analysis it so well deserves. Being a Hollywood star with a controversial reputation has caused scholars and feminists to have concerns about the authenticity of her feminist perspective, as they may prefer literature that highlights marginalized voices and addresses systematic issues of gender inequality and its intersectionality with age. However, in 1997, *Feminist Issues* was the only journal that explored the self-representation of Jane Fonda in comparison to Barbara Bush shedding light on the “limits of resistance” in “aging bodies” (Dinnerstein and Weitz 1997). Nevertheless, it is promising to see recognition from some

reputable sources on Fonda's publication. While the *Los Angeles Times* called *Prime Time* “part autobiographical confessional, part life advice; a comforting companion” (Stein 2011), *The Sunday Times* praised it for its “straightforward tone” (*Publisher Weekly* 2011). Upon reading her book, it becomes clear that Fonda does not intend to romanticize aging. Rather, she accepts that it can also involve challenges such as mental and physical health issues. She also admits how growing old can be influenced by luck and genetics. That said, she does emphasize people's agency over approximately two-thirds of their life course. Therefore, she redefines luck as “opportunity meeting preparation” to improve one's chances of having “the most peaceful, generous, loving, sensual, transcendent time of all” (Fonda 2011, xviii). To fully grasp this concept, it is essential to investigate the three maxims in her integrative paradigm shift. Each section of this paper will be dedicated to exploring one of these foundational principles.

Section one delves into the first maxim; the principle of life review and its transformative impact on self-examination, examining the intricate details of her experiences and moments of transition shared in her memoir. What a life review – also referred to as life writing or life history – constitutes, has been debated over time, leading to its interchangeable use with autobiography in the early 20th century (Schmidt 2014). Scholars like Philippe Lejeune, Sidonie Smith, and Paul John Eakin have significantly influenced this discourse. Despite controversies over its origin, experts widely agree that life writing played a crucial role in women's self-examination and self-definition (Dowd and Eckerle 2010). Sidonie Smith defines this type of self-narration as a process wherein “...[t]he past is given new meanings and perspectives,” ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of one's identity (Smith and Watson 1998, 3). This is precisely why Jane Fonda began her life review: “To know where I was going, I had to know where I'd been” (Fonda 2012, 6:20').

Section two discusses the theory of generativity through Fonda's advocacy for a lasting legacy and her perspective on embracing life-affirming death as an integral part of the human experience, driving her quest for meaning. The German Pulitzer Prize winner Erik Erikson, introduced the concept behind generativity in *Childhood and Society* (1950). In his exact terms, generativity is the “...[p]rimary concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (Erikson 1963, 240). The desire to contribute to the well-being of the future generation and to engage in forming meaningful relationships allows individuals to see beyond their own self-interest (Erikson, 1963, 244). For this exact reason, Fonda believes the dynamic interplay between generations, characterized by their active collaboration and contribution can lead to experiencing a peaceful, fulfilled life (Fonda 2011, 264).

While leaning more towards a conceptual framework than a theory, Erikson suggests a crucial interconnection between generativity and mortality in the psychological development of humans (Erikson, 1963, 243). According to him, those who are unable to navigate generativity successfully, usually suffer from accepting the reality of mortality and thus, restore to denial as a coping mechanism (Erikson, 1963, 244). One cannot hold Fonda responsible for such a mindset as the awareness of the narrative of death was what fueled her to live every day with purpose. As she discusses this part of life quite often in her book, she also urges her readers to imagine a scenario where one could live indefinitely, to emphasize that “When time is endless, moments lose their preciousness” (Fonda 2011, 309). What's more, she claims that cultivating a positive awareness of mortality allows one to “...[g]row into age,” rather than merely “...[s]ink into” it (Fonda 2011, 314).

As its third maxim, the final section of this paper will discuss the concept of Omega Point. Fonda dedicates this chapter to narrating the life-changing story of the psychologist Dr. Jean Houston and her encounter with Teilhard when she was young. Teilhard proposed a complex and influential theory that combined science, theology, and philosophy. His worldview outlined the fundamental beliefs of orthodox Christianity where all humans inherently possess the divine within (Birx 1981). His most well-known theory, the Omega Point – discussed in *The Phenomenon of Man* (1938) – suggests a cosmic evolution towards a more complex, structured, and interconnected cosmos (Vidal 2021). Fonda's unique take on

Teilhard's philosophy draws together the other two principles. Firstly, Teilhard claims that the journey to the Omega point requires humanity to become more self-reflective (Teilhard 1958, 88) – a practice Fonda encourages through doing a life review. Secondly, evolution occurs through small steps towards a collective progression (Teilhard 1958, 148) – in line with the concept of generativity, contributing to the society at large. Therefore, the process of aging viewed through Teilhard's lens transforms into a significant journey, playing a pivotal role in the course of life.

Given the intricate and intertwined nature of age, addressing it requires a multifaceted exploration, beyond its physical dimension and its portrayal in cultures and societies, and such a paradigm shift – connecting various disciplines – can offer a panoptic view of the intricacies of advanced age. However, since this paper primarily focuses on Jane Fonda's legacy, it acknowledges its limitation in providing an extensive examination of each theory as it covers complex interdisciplinary topics such as psychology, philosophy, and sociology. Yet, this piece aims to provide a thorough understanding of aging through Fonda's way of life by demonstrating the vital role and interconnectedness of each theory. The ultimate goal is to establish a foundation for future discussions on the diverse facets of age and gender among the younger generation, in the hopes of creating "...[a] society for all ages," as Kofi Annan envisioned. (Annan 1999).

From Act to Act: Fonda's Saga of Self-Discovery

Fonda's decision to undergo a life review started as a "narrative project" in the form of a short video to survey, observe, and reflect on her past experiences as she approached her 60th birthday (Fonda 2005, 533). *The New York Times* claims that this project was her attempt to discover the different "[...] themes of her life" (Dowd 2005). Fonda's scars, wounds, and failures served as the means for her to explore these themes; they "...[a]re the very things that sometimes deliver us to ourselves" (Fonda 2011, 21). This initial project, I believe, laid the foundation for what eventually evolved into her memoir, *My Life So Far*. Her sophisticated approach to organizing her autobiography into Three Acts vividly depicts her journey as she ages and showcases her road to personal evolution. Quite consciously, as she confirms, Fonda drew parallels between the stages of a theatrical play and the chapters of her life. This analogy led to the structure and organization of her memoir.

In the theater, the Third Act is when everything that has happened in Acts I and II must pay off if the play is to be memorable. "Maybe life is like that," I thought. Maybe to know how to have a good Third Act, I needed to look back at Acts I and II [...] I knew I had to clear a path to my future by clarifying the road from my past until now. I didn't want to be like Christopher Columbus, who didn't know where he was headed when he left, didn't know where he was when he got there, and didn't know where he'd been when he got back. (Fonda 2011, 20)

This statement serves as a cornerstone for the concept of a life review as proposed by Robert Butler; a gradual recollection of memories and unresolved conflicts from the past that allows reassessment and resolution. Butler not only made a groundbreaking contribution to the recognition and discourse surrounding age-related discrimination but also investigated the power of conducting a life review and its capacity for transformation (Butler 1963, 66). He saw life review as a widespread mental process that leads to an expanded understanding of past experiences. According to him, this process developing in later life often occurs as individuals become more conscious of their limited time and helps them confront the reality of their mortality (Butler 1963, 66). Fonda, much the same, was urged to revisit her memories and look for meaning beyond the mere surface situations as she approached her 60s as the "last and final Act" (Fonda 2011, 19). Engaging in a life review allowed her to seek the authentic version of

herself and to consciously step forward through a continuous, reflective, and internal examination of her life.

Writing about one's past experience becomes a source of strength and a way to transform pain into something meaningful, ultimately preparing the mind for a shift in consciousness. Lejeune – who characterizes life writing as “having a dialogue with the past” (Lejeune 2009, 20) – admits that exploring one's own thoughts and feelings requires a considerable amount of courage which he sees as a pre-requisite for such sort of self-analysis (Lejeune 2009, 94). A more contemporary view of Lejeune's viewpoint – by Smith and Watson – refers to life writing as “the dialect of confession” highlighting the intimate and often painful nature of self-examination (Smith and Watson 1998, 87). Fonda similarly attributes her strength to “The Gift of Pain” (Fonda 2005, 264). Thus, confronting painful experiences serves as a powerful tool, providing individuals with the freedom and authority to assign new meanings to personal experiences (Smith and Watson 1998, 194). By doing so, a deeper understanding may emerge, which helps individuals gain a new perspective, one that may lead to reinterpretation of the meaning of those experiences. Fonda describes such freedom as having the capacity to change her perception of what has occurred even though it cannot be reversed. Nonetheless, she believes such confrontation empowers her with an authority that represents the pinnacle of human liberty (Fonda 2011, 38).

Excavating her life, Fonda felt the weight of fundamental cultural beliefs that influenced her sense of self as a woman, realizing how the understanding of one's life's dynamic is more culturally determined than one thinks and therefore, became adamant to investigate various themes of her life. “All the raw material was there for me to resurrect... It would be up to me to decipher the clues it held, to identify the patterns – and to be brave enough to name them” (Fonda 2005, 532). The remainder of this section will bring to light the patterns she identified and named. Exploring her First Act reveals the roots of her fear of intimacy and the internalization of gender roles that dominated her sense of self. Additionally, her Second Act investigates her adeptness at navigating life's transitions which according to the host of NPR TV, John Powers, demonstrates “...[h]er innate skills in how seamlessly her personal U-turns align with the constantly evolving cultural landscape of the time” (Powers, 2018).

Beginning with her First Act, Fonda delves into her earliest memories, uncovering the first clue she needs to decipher: lingering childhood recollections. She traces her fear of intimacy to a sense of disappointment in being born as a girl and observing her brother receiving more maternal attention. (Fonda 2005, 43). Such memories, with strong emotional ties according to Butler, are capable of unlocking mysteries of the human psyche that can provide new and significant meanings to previous experiences (Butler 1963, 67) – which is precisely what it did for Fonda. Instead of blaming her mother – who committed suicide when Fonda was just 11 – she learned about the complexities of her parents' lives, leading to the realization that her mother's actions were not a reflection of her worth (Fonda 2011, 23). This journey led her to master the art of detachment and to have impartial observations – rather than subjectivity (Fonda 2011, 36). Detachment is a form of self-control, a state of practicality, which emphasizes a thoughtful and objective perspective in approaching events (Lejeune 2009, 106). Through writing about those hidden and unresolved conflicts, Fonda uncovered an alternative reality and released the burden of a transformative experience. Engaging in a life review, “...[h]elps us decommission our demons, and frees us from the past” (Fonda 2011, 36). This single aspect of life writing becomes particularly significant in the aging process as it restores balance and harmony in the personal, moral, and relational aspects of a human's life by offering pathways to healing and acceptance.

The second clue and a recurring theme in Fonda's First Act was the internalization of gender identity (Fonda 2011, 41). The cultural depiction of gender roles can be both shown and hidden through conscious and unconscious actions. Consequently, societal expectations shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and become internalized messages that if not addressed consciously, as Fonda claims, can “continue to determine our thoughts and behaviors

throughout our whole lives, in ways that can rob us of our full humanity.” (Fonda 2011, 42). Earlier in the discourse of feminist philosophy, The French existentialist and feminist, Simone de Beauvoir considered these internalized messages to manifest themselves into characteristics and behaviors as a reaction to the environment or circumstances (de Beauvoir, 1953, 13). This perspective helps us to understand Fonda’s prolonged attempt to conform to traditional femininity influenced by her upbringing.

Observing her father’s preferences – ideals of ‘womanhood’– and witnessing the dynamics of his marriages, shaped Jane’s perception of what it means to be a woman and continued to showcase itself through her three marriages. Furthermore, de Beauvoir’s exploration of the cultural construction of womanhood in *The Second Sex* (1949) asserts “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir 1953, 43) highlighting another crucial and negative role of cultural representations in shaping gender identity. Nevertheless, her statement, in my opinion, does not consider women’s personal experiences as a factor that can also shape one’s gender identity. If women are strictly limited by these norms, the concept of “becoming a woman” loses its meaning, since femininity becomes fixed within societal rules. Her notion lacks the implication that women can, in fact, undergo a series of personal transformations to discover their true selves.

Fonda, however, was able to overcome the constraints imposed by social conventions, using the dominant cultural narrative of womanhood as a powerful force to embrace her authentic self, and took direct responsibility for her evolving identity. Central to this transformative process was acceptance, enabling her to view herself as a wholly unique entity capable of navigating a variety of contradictory personas. This approach led to a journey characterized by the bravery to accept rather than suppress her gender identity. As a result, it was in the later stages of her life that she considered her “feminist consciousness” taking up “residence” in her body. To borrow her words, feminism is to comprehend womanhood “...[s]o thoroughly on every level – spiritually, intellectually, bodily, physically that you become one with what you have observed; you merge with it” (Fonda 2005, 558). I believe it has been the dual consciousness –the *self-reflected* in cultural representation and the *self-experienced* – that has led to a new and empowering understanding of her being. The birth of an *individuality* that serves as an ongoing source of strength. Her sincere conviction in women’s inherent strength forms the foundation of her perspective which views aging as a weapon, empowering women. As societal perspective evolved, de Beauvoir’s rigid notion of womanhood; “...[t]he body is not a thing, it is a situation,” (Darroch 2008) – depicting the relationship between the body and gender for women – could have found embodiment in Fonda’s illustration of life – metamorphosing through Acts as an independent being – *becoming* what they are meant to be.

As the “Narrative of life takes on many different forms and meaning” (Maierhofer and Hartung 2007, 2), Fonda was faced with the intersection of gender and age, marking a significant cultural milestone in her Second Act. A phenomenon, that the American writer, philosopher, and political activist, Susan Sontag called “The Double Standard of Aging” (Sontag 1972, 3). *Saturday Reviews* published Sontag’s article in 1972 which began with a bold statement referring to such gendered-aging disparity as an “instrumental oppression” that suggests aging enhances a man while it destroys women. (Sontag 1972, 3). Later, Fonda humorously echoes Sontag’s sentiment in *Women Coming of Age* (1984): “The changes in his appearance become *additions* to who he is as a person, whereas those same changes in us become *liabilities*. My pal Redford gets furrows and character lines, I get wrinkles and crow’s feet. It ain’t fair!” (Fonda 1984,24). Her observation sheds light on the reality that women are “aging in a culture of shame,” and are considered to be “hyper-visible” since they reveal the physical signs of aging (Bouson 2020).

Nevertheless, Fonda’s comment was not just a humorous statement. She personally experienced firsthand how men and women are treated, particularly within the youth-centric landscape of the entertainment industry, having collaborated with Robert Redford on multiple occasions in films such as *Tall Story* (1960), *The Chase* (1966), *Barefoot in the Park* (1967), *The*

Electric Horseman (1979), and *Our Souls at Night* (2017). Since actors and actresses are agents who “construct important socio-cultural paradigms through their performance” (Cappelli 2019, 2), she became keenly observant of Hollywood’s differing treatment of aging based on gender. Simply put, while male actors may continue to land major roles far into their senior years, female actresses, in particular, are frequently the target of harsh criticism and few opportunities as they become older and are assigned one-dimensional roles such as being a mother or a grandmother. This discrepancy not only reflects Hollywood’s emphasis on youth and beauty but also reinforces negative social perceptions about aging. Despite it all, just as Sontag invited her readers to “disobey the convention,” to “liberate” themselves (Sontag 1972, 3), Fonda saw it as a mission to be the “pioneers to chart [...] a positive new trail” for themselves and their daughters. “It’s up to us to redefine femininity. We are women coming of age” (Fonda 1984, 418). She views Act II as a pivotal time for women, marking their transition into the Third Act as they find their voice again and “[...]become the more assertive gender” (Fonda 2011, 275).

Navigating through transitions highlights pivotal moments in life that shape one’s identity and therefore, it emerges as yet another prominent characteristic of Fonda’s Second Act. A trait that many attribute to Fonda’s inherent spirit of Americanness. Thomas Kiernan – who penned two biographies about Fonda– suggests that these transitions not only mirror her journey but also symbolize the challenges the nation had gone through, and claims that she is the “[...]f]ocusable microcosm of the polarization of the American spirit ...” (Kiernan 1973 x, xi) In addition to Kiernan, Powers notes how fascinating the nature of these shifts has been as if she welcomed every new identity as though she had discovered a hidden truth: “[...]h]er ceaseless search for her true self may be the most American thing about her” (Powers, 2018). Later in *Prime Time*, Fonda explains how navigating these transitional periods stemmed from her quest to find meaning in life, a feature that made her Second Act unique. She named this period – her mid-forties through her mid-fifties – as “A Time of Building and of “In-Betweenness” (Fonda, 2011 55) This phase was a period marked by questioning and introspection, a place that Fonda characterizes as “[...]a] time of vulnerability, but also one of tremendous creative ferment” (Fonda 2011, 64). Based on the characteristics provided by Fonda, Act II bears a resemblance to what William Bridges, the American author and organizational consultant, calls “the neutral zone” in *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes* (2004).

Bridges aims to distinguish between change, as the final endeavor, and the transitional phases leading up to change. He believes “transitions” encompass three distinct phases: the ending, the neutral zone, and the new beginning, and emphasizes the importance of the neutral zone (Bridges 2004, 133). The neutral zone constitutes the intermediary stage in a transitional process, commencing with an ending and paving the way for a beginning (Bridges 2004, 4). He continues to explain how the intricate nature of the neutral zone can act as a catalyst for personal growth and development if steered adeptly (Bridges 2004, 134). The value of this transitional phase has been highlighted by various authors with different names and definitions throughout history. Victor Frankl –the Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor – calls it the “Existential Vacuum” in *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Frankl 1959, 110). He characterizes it as a phase filled with emptiness, confusion, and boredom (Frankl 1959, 112), similar to Fonda. People arrive at this phase as they grapple with a profound search for purpose or meaning in their lives and it ironically occurs in the absence of clear values or goals (Frankl 1959, 112).

Alongside these two influential authors, American author and editor, Suzanne Braun Levine names this phase the “Fertile Void” in *Inventing the Rest of Our Lives: Women in Second Adulthood* (Levine 2005, 48). Levine describes this stage as setting off on an existential quest without a set route. Similar to Frankl’s perspective, Levine claims that establishing goals at this time will be counterproductive since meaningful goals will naturally unfold in due course (Levine 2004, 49). Drawing on Levine’s insights, Fonda realized that skillful navigation meant letting go and resisting the need to numb oneself with distraction. Rather, she stresses how

critical it is to reevaluate and redefine the framework of the upcoming new era (Fonda 2011, 64). She therefore references Levine and argues that the fertile void is the best time for conducting a life review (Fonda 2011, 66). This reflection makes it possible to examine challenges, and unresolved conflicts, ultimately paving the way for a more purposeful Act III.

As transitions become a defining feature of Fonda's Second Act, her journey not only reveals significant transformations – which I would refer to as a *macro* transition – but what I would also categorize as subtle yet impactful ones; *micro* transitions. These nuanced changes, in my opinion, were the result of her immersion into the various roles she has played as an actress. This process allowed her to experience the different “shadow persona” she believes all humans possess (Fonda 2005, 453). Moreover, these micro transitions helped her build up her feminist mentality in her Second Act, whether it was in the form of supporting women by helping them make their bodies strong, or bringing gender issues into her movies. An example would be her role in *Klute* (1971) where she had her doubts about playing a call girl called Bree– “Would a real feminist do that? I asked myself. *A real feminist wouldn't have to ask herself such a question.*” (Fonda 2005, 248). Still, she was able to expand her individualistic self by exploring the complexity of this female role (Fonda 2005, 253-54).

Just as *Klute* became the pivotal point for Fonda's radical transition to reinvent herself (Grace Lee, 2021), other movies also played their part in the micro transitions that ultimately led her to embrace her authenticity. *Coming Home* (1978) is a film that reflects anti-war feminism as her character experiences female empowerment and questions the societal norms surrounding the war. *Julia* (1977) portrays female empowerment through female friendships, and the famous *9 to 5* (1980) which has been called “a feminist revenge comedy” by *The Guardian*, addresses workplace sexism and gender inequality (Bradshaw 2018). Last but not least, *Grace and Frankie*, a Netflix series that has been hailed for reshaping the cultural landscape of the aging narrative (*Aging in Beauty* 2017), and for giving an empowering and positive cultural face to older adults (Osmanski 2019). While scholarly research on Jane Fonda's life and contributions to aging and feminism may be limited, some attention has been given to *Grace and Frankie*. The *Journal of Aging Studies*, for instance, examined issues related to aging, success, and societal views, as well as the consequences of the fourth age in a neoliberal setting (Sako and Oró-Piqueras, 2023). Furthermore, a paper published in *Feminist Media Studies* focused on how the show uses “technologies of the self,” such as different self-care techniques and approaches, to navigate power dynamics and societal pressures related to aging and neoliberalism (Dalal and Rozmarin, 2022).

The essence of this Netflix series has been captured beautifully in another article published by the *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, where it explores what the author calls “New Femininity” to elaborate on the evolving concept of femininity and implies a break from conventional gender norms and expectations. Moreover, the author claims that *Grace & Frankie* “...[e]nlists viewers to move beyond the “othering” of old women, by confronting the complex unconscious attitudes, conflict and fear about aging women and their social behavior” (Cappelli 2019, 6). In simple terms, the series encourages its audience to face the implicit prejudices and combat this “othering” that creates a sense of us (the perceived norm) versus them (the marginalized). It is noteworthy to mention that Fonda does not only showcase these various ‘others’ in her movies. Perhaps being an actress has blessed her with the empathy to embody ‘others’ in her life beyond her acting career. I believe Fonda undergoes a transformative process as an actor, one which she refers to as embracing the other: “We are asked to get inside the skin of the “other,” to feel with the “other,” to understand the “other.” Being able to see from this “other” point of view gives actors compassion (Fonda 2005, 457). She embodies each one of her characters as she may have been one of them at any time in her life. Rather than viewing them as outsiders she is able to reunite with the selves residing in her.

Building upon her journey of self-discovery in her Second Act, Fonda prepared for the later stages of her life by creating the “Prime Time Workout.” A program included in the final chapter of *Women Coming of Age* that would influence her Third Act. (Fonda, 1984, p. 17). As a

woman in her 40s, she saw Act Three as a time for growth and self-realization. A stage that society considers to be “over the hill.” Yet from her perspective, the other side of the hill holds the promise of a land filled with wisdom (Fonda 2011, 5). Such a perspective is consistent with the notion of individualism as defined by Metchnikoff. He viewed youth as a preparatory stage and emphasized the transformative evolution of the mind as humans age (Metchnikoff 2004, 233). According to him, aging is an opportunity for future humans, as it allows “the preservation of intelligence and of the power to work.” He believed a fragile constitution could coexist with a worthwhile existence (Metchnikoff 2004, 98). His remarks highlight how each person has the capacity to develop their sense of self even in the face of precarious physical conditions. Individualism is also an essential feature of Arnheim’s Staircase. The aging mind, according to him, emphasizes an ongoing growth in wisdom with the passing years, symbolizing a journey to “the high worldview” (Arnheim 1986, 286). This concept serves as the cornerstone of Fonda’s evolutionary paradigm shift, shaping the first maxim.

Redefining Purpose in the Third Act: Fonda’s Pilgrimage of The Future

The Third Act, according to Margaret Cruikshank, is a phase marked with self-improvement–encompassing positive transformations in various aspects, emotional, social, and personal, especially for women. However, she believes the ability to harvest the potential created by increased life expectancy lies in disregarding the antiquated notions of aging. Such outdated perceptions have given birth to cultural myths portraying individuals in their Third Act as “[a]lien creatures, not part of our common life” (Cruikshank 2013, 25-26). Nevertheless, the current generation of boomers – empowered by the longevity revolution – has been embracing new perspectives on aging in the 21st century, which is why Fonda advocates for a more inclusive society. She believes that older individuals have valuable contributions to make and being recognized and appreciated for their values and experiences can significantly impact their perspective on the process of aging as it is closely tied to their sense of purpose (Fonda 2011, 255).

Fonda’s advocacy for a bolder trace of the elderly’s contribution to their communities resonates with Erikson’s concept of generativity. A concept that involves a shift from self-focus to a broader social radius taking the form of mentoring, coaching, and nurturing the future generation. According to Erikson, wisdom is the ultimate virtue that manifests itself in the later phases of life (Clayton 1975, 120). This recognition has allowed Erikson to designate generativity as the “[b]lueprint of essential strength” in the seventh stage of his psychological development theory; Generativity vs. Stagnation (Erikson 1963, 241). Fonda’s firsthand experience of generativity during her time shooting *On Golden Pond* (1982) with Katherine Hepburn reflects this concept in action. Despite the complex nature of the film –mirroring the sensitive and real father/daughter dynamic between Jane and Henry Fonda –she reflects on her experience with the iconic Hepburn as educative, eye-opening, and life-changing (Switzer 2022). The dynamics of the relationship between these two women highlight the intergenerational exchange inherent in generativity, where older individuals pass down knowledge, and support the younger ones.

Some thirty years after introducing the concept of generativity in *Childhood and Society* (1950), Erikson further developed his idea in *The Life Cycle Completed* (1997). He claimed that over time, individuals “become more and more human,” as they move towards a fuller realization of their existence: “In the beginning, we are what we are given. By midlife, when we have finally learned to stand on our two feet, we learn that to complete our lives, we are called to give to others so that when we leave this world, we can be what we have given” (Erikson, 1997, 97). Based on this statement, Act III gains prominence as it reflects the period when individuals focus on making a positive impact and creating a lasting legacy. Erikson’s assertion, “Only by doing and making do we become” (Erikson, 1997, 97), presents itself in Fonda’s concise and articulate perspective: “We are what we do” (Fonda 2011, 257). They both emphasize that

one's choices and deeds determine their character and purpose in life and that these actions play a crucial role in forming the evolving identity as one ages – a notion that resonates deeply with Fonda's life doctrine.

Despite widespread beliefs that Fonda's career was tainted after her activism during the Vietnam War and her trip to Hanoi, she was, in fact, laying the foundation for her “third-act activism” (Fonda 2005, 278). This included the establishment of Laurel Springs, a 200-acre arts summer camp in Santa Barbara, running for 14 consecutive years from 1977 to 1991. The camp served as a transformative space for children from diverse backgrounds to explore new identities, shed sexist stereotypes, and cultivate compassion and empathy (Fonda 2005, 282). Laurel Spring was more than just a career for Fonda; it became a powerful journey of facing lessons that were long overdue. Witnessing the struggles of young campers navigating through complex changes, Fonda recognized patterns similar to her own experiences with her parents and even with her own children and realized how effective-parenting can instill resilience in children (Fonda 2005, 381). Observing recurring patterns persisting across generations at the camp inspired her to establish the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (G-CAPP) in 1995 (Fonda 2005, 520). Her philosophy, “You teach what you need to learn,” underscores her commitment to continuous personal growth and learning, principles that guided her in establishing G-CAPP.

In essence, the main goal behind the foundation of G-CAPP was to assist adolescents in identifying the reasons that compel them to become parents while “...[t]hey are not yet themselves” (Fonda 2005, 520). As someone who once missed such insights in her youth, Fonda became dedicated to providing young individuals with comprehensive education and support through the initiatives of this organization. G-CAPP was later followed by another project – the Jane Fonda Center at the Emory University School of Medicine – addressing child sexual abuse as it had been closely tied to adolescent pregnancy (Fonda 2005, 520). Her second establishment allowed her to go back to her roots and make peace with her past and her mother – who had been abused at a young age. This is the foundation of her second maxim as she believes “...[t]he most profound and rewarding forms of generativity are the ones that have personal relevance (Fonda 2005, 522). A dynamic and passion-fueled force that continually adapts to meet the evolving needs of the younger generation. This is evident in her relentless advocacy against climate change, even to this day at the age of 86. It reflects her ongoing effort to redefine her purpose in the hopes of leaving the Earth in a better and safer state than she found it.

Acts of generativity empower individuals in their Third Act to recognize new milestones to achieve and goals to strive towards. Moreover, it enables them to overcome the challenges associated with the loss of identity that many face as they age. Loss of identity is often experienced during retirement, which according to Gullette can have severe effects on people above 60 (Gullette 2011, 48). Put simply, as a career-oriented individual, a person's sense of self and purpose is closely tied to their professional roles, therefore retirement can lead to a sense of disorientation. However, I believe that people who age do not merely suffer from a loss of identity; but rather face the formidable task of navigating their shifting identities – which is why accepting the possibility that one may need to focus their attention elsewhere is necessary. Generativity, thus, allows individuals to utilize a different reality that is already within them, or to borrow Fonda's words, “...[i]t allows people to replace the lost social networks they had at work or through marriage with a new network” (Fonda 2011, 262). Andrew Achenbaum aptly characterizes Act III as “(re)creating networks for lifelong learning and sharing talents, to develop [...] the capacities of human individuals to contribute to the well-being of a society” (Achenbaum 2007, 49).

As engaging in generative activities leads to an enriched life, Erikson also notes that individuals who struggle with accepting the reality of mortality may find it hard to navigate this stage of life (Erikson 1963, 241-243). Here, the intricate and powerful interplay between generativity and mortality becomes evident. In simple terms, those preoccupied with accepting

mortality may overlook the importance of leaving a legacy for society or future generations. This is yet another reason why developing generativity plays a central role in Erikson's last developmental stage. While it provides the grounds for establishing and guiding the next generation, it also helps individuals to approach and accept their mortality. Similarly, Fonda views a positive life-affirming death awareness to be a prerequisite for engaging in acts of generativity, as the understanding of life's transience allows individuals to embrace aging as a path to wholeness. She quotes the Austrian poet and novelist, Rainer Maria Rilke, who said "Life and Death are the greatest gifts – and usually go unopened" (Fonda 2011, 276). This notion underscores the fundamental aspect of human existence; to confront and celebrate the complexities of life and death.

Although death has always been the subject of interest among many philosophers, poets, and scientists, Socrates, Plato, Emily Dickinson, and Sigmund Freud to name a few, thanatology – the scientific study of death and the practices associated with it – did not gain as much attention as gerontology did, as if death was a theme that was considered "off-limits" (Fonseca and Testoni 2012). It was Metchnikoff, who coined both terms – thanatology and gerontology – in 1903 to suggest two new fields of study (Fonseca and Testoni 2012). He offered a distinctive viewpoint on accepting death and claimed that if death occurs in advanced old age, aligning with its natural occurrence at the end of the life cycle, it will be embraced without fear (Metchnikoff 2004, 91-92). At the time of his book's publication, instances of individuals experiencing what he called "true natural death" were quite rare, as many people died young from illnesses and various unknown diseases (Metchnikoff 2004, 86). Yet in the contemporary world, with the longevity revolution having increased human lifespans, it becomes imperative to reevaluate societal and cultural views on death.

Despite not being acknowledged as a discipline initially, the field eventually witnessed the rise of notable scholars over the years (Fonseca and Testoni 2012). In the late 20th century, scholars like Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, author of *On Death and Dying* (1969), gained prominence by introducing the five stages of grief. Similarly, Robert Kastenbaum's *Death, Society, and Human Experience* (1977) has remained a landmark text, significantly contributing to the understanding of mortality and its effects on individuals and communities (Corr 2015). Additionally, *The Human Encounter with Death* (1978), co-authored by Stanislav Grof and Joan Halifax, explores the profound and multifaceted aspects of humans' relationship with mortality. This book integrates insights from psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and spirituality to offer a clear framework to cultivate a positive death awareness. Finally, the author of *Being Mortal* (2014), Atul Gawande – a practicing surgeon – presents a contemporary perspective on death. *The Guardian* eloquently captures Gawande's message as a plea to the medical community to refocus their efforts from extending life to making it more meaningful (Bedell 2014). This is a compelling call that aligns with the essence of generativity.

However, despite the advancements in understanding death, Western societies view death "as an indignity that needs to be *cleaned up*" (Fonda 2011, 313). According to Fonda, one of the main reasons people avoid talking about death is that most civilizations are not psychologically ready to confront this inevitable aspect of human existence (Fonda 2011, 313). Such a view on death reflects a cultural behavior of reluctance and discomfort in addressing the topic openly which not only impacts the psychological well-being of dying individuals but also influences the attitudes of those left behind. Regardless, she extends her examination to explore the contrasting perspectives found in non-Western cultures, emphasizing the practice of a life-affirming death awareness among them. Fonda draws extensively from the insights of Joan Halifax – an activist, anthropologist, author, ecologist, and Zen Buddhism priest – known for her courageous and compassionate traits. According to Halifax, death in some cultures, such as Vietnam, Mexico, and ancient India is often perceived as a transition rather than the absolute termination of existence. As a natural part of life, it marks a transition to a different realm or state of being rather than a definitive endpoint (Halifax and Grof 1978, 2-3). These cultures can

provide a framework for accepting and experiencing death in a positive light, where the emphasis is on continuity and interconnectedness.

Death as a mere transition has been explored by other prominent figures such as the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung. In his classic publication *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933), Jung promotes a comprehensive theory of human psychology by examining the connections between philosophy, psychology, politics, and religion (Tulip 2019). His investigation of death as a transition reveals his profound comprehension of the human condition and the capacity for transformation through embracing death as a natural part of existence. In addition, Jung emphasizes the need to live a meaningful life as opposed to a directionless one, which is strongly related to the idea of generativity by Erikson. Death to him, is an integral part of life's ongoing journey rather than its conclusion (Jung 1933, 112). This mindset contributes to a more holistic and affirming understanding of the human experience that extends beyond physical mortality. Individuals may even be more inclined to explore and develop their spiritual beliefs, discovering meaning and purpose in their journey. As they recognize the interconnectedness of life and death, they will experience a sense of responsibility toward future generations.

Fonda believes “Death gives shape and meaning” to one’s life (Fonda 2011, 313). The tension of something’s opposite is what gives it significance. She suggests that “*sinking* into age” with denial and resistance leads one to miss out on the fruits of wholeness. On the contrary, “choosing to *grow* into age” entails accepting, letting go, and welcoming the emptiness that comes with humility. Given that she considers death to be “[a] democratic inevitability” for all people, Fonda does not think negatively of it. However, what is a worse fate than dying for her is “never having fully lived” (Fonda 2011, 314). One may reimagine their aging journey as a period of development, purpose, and contribution by realizing the importance of leaving a meaningful legacy and accepting mortality as a part of the human experience. This holistic approach not only empowers people to age mindfully but also promotes a more pleasant and satisfying experience for all generations by challenging societal conventions and prejudices related to aging.

Embracing the Cosmic Path Within: Fonda’s Inner Journey of Aging

Fonda introduces the concept of the “work in,” emphasizing its importance alongside physical exercises. “There are so many paths to the realms that lie within,” she claims, aiming to highlight the value of introspection and self-discovery in the aging process. She emphasizes that gaining insight from this journey requires embracing the alien feelings within and the ability to feel comfortable with the uncomfortable (Fonda 2011, 320). Her intentional ‘journey within’ took place through *sesshin* retreats led by Joan Halifax (Fonda 2011, 321). In Zen monasteries, *sesshin* literally means touching the heart-mind (*The Pluralism Project* 2020). Fonda describes these sessions as intense silent meditation, unifying the heart and mind resulting in a state of stillness in the present moment. Going back, Fonda had experienced such a state of mind – unconsciously – during the loss of her father in her Second Act, when “being and not doing” marked her first steps in learning to be still and allowed her to make peace with her father. Nevertheless, experiencing intentional stillness and the consciousness of the mind was more difficult than she had experienced before as if she was “waging a war with her mind” (Fonda 2011, 321).

Fonda shares Halifax’s insight in *Prime Time*, emphasizing that the nature of this journey, requires acknowledging and embracing the unpleasant state of mind through a strategy of “non-denial” (Fonda 2011, 323). Simply put, the rationale behind this approach is rooted in the understanding that true inner transformation can only happen through awareness and acceptance rather than avoidance. This process can lead to a deeper understanding of the self and ultimately a greater sense of inner peace and tranquility. Consequently, Fonda was able to have “an unfiltered experience of reality” for the first time

(Fonda 2011, 323). Her firsthand encounter with such an experience highlights the teachings of Eckhart Tolle. In his book *The Power of Now*, Tolle asserts that “Identification with the mind” is the greatest obstacle to experiencing the ‘unfiltered’ reality as mentioned by Fonda (Tolle 1997, 28).

As one of the most inspiring and visionary spiritual teachers in the world today, Tolle explains that to experience the state of *Being*, one should disengage with the compulsive thinker, slowing down the process of thinking and observing the thought itself (Tolle 1997, 31). As one listens to a thought, they become aware of not only the thought itself but also of their own presence as the observer of the thought. This brings a new level of awareness to one’s consciousness, feeling a deeper self, a conscious presence that lies behind the thought. Since the individual no longer identifies with it, the thought subsides, losing its power. (Tolle 1997, 32). It is then that the feeling of stillness and peace emerges within. The starting point of the natural state of *Being*. This is why Fonda reflects on the positive impact of contemplative activities, emphasizing the value of becoming “permeable to wisdom” and acknowledging the inner voice as one ages (Fonda 2011, 328). In other words, as mindful aging involves self-reflection and self-awareness, it allows individuals to appreciate and accept themselves on a deeper level.

The state of intentional stillness offered Fonda a gateway to a deeper understanding of the self, one that transcends the limits of everyday thinking. According to her, this transformative journey was triggered by a significant catalyst; “The Gift of Pain” (Fonda 2005, 462). Pain once more served as the catalyst for her journey toward self-discovery. Viewed through Tolle’s perspective, instead of fighting against the pain, Fonda was able to expose her pain to the light of consciousness; to watch it, and accept it as part of the present moment.

Through the pain, I could tell that something new was happening to me. Trauma was creating an opening in my psyche. I needed to pay attention, to be ready to step through and descend into it. Whatever *it* was. One day I heard myself say out loud, “If God wanted me to suffer like this, there must be a reason.” God? I looked around. *Did I just say God?* Never had such a thought come into my head. I’m an atheist, right? But the moment I said it, the texture of my pain changed ever so slightly. It became easier to be patient, giving myself over to... what? I didn’t know. (Fonda 2005, 466)

It is fascinating how Fonda’s urge to form an authentic relationship with herself seamlessly intertwines with her yearning for spirituality. However, this is not a bizarre occurrence, it is quite common for the connection between the two to become increasingly significant as individuals age.

According to Achenbaum’s findings, manifestations of spirituality have been on the rise among at least two-thirds of seniors in America since the late 19th century (Achenbaum 2007, 18). He highlights this trend in *Older Americans, Vital Communities*, to emphasize how older individuals prioritize a rich spiritual life as a key contributor to a meaningful existence (Achenbaum 2007, 19). Considering the trends observed by him in 2005, it is reasonable to assume that there has been a probable addition to the number of spiritual experiences reported by seniors. In fact, information from the recent scholarly work of Berit Lewis –an accredited author who developed a mindfulness-based framework for the longevity revolution – indicates a robust link between spirituality and well-being and acknowledges spirituality as a necessary dimension for a good life. In her book *Aging Upwards* (2023), She refers to the theory of *Gerotranscendence* developed by the Swedish sociologist, Lars Tornstam (Lewis 2023, 93). Tornstam was able to draw insight from scholars such as Jung and Erikson to capture the phenomenon of aging as a process of maturity and growth: “Gerotranscendence implies a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increased life satisfaction” (Tornstam 2011). It appears that those who cultivate their spiritual strengths are better equipped to handle both the joy and challenges that come with advanced age.

Furthermore, Achenbaum elaborates on yet another defining aspect of spirituality, which aligns harmoniously with, or potentially amplifies, Fonda's second principle; her promotion of Erikson's theory of generativity. In his view, "Spirituality unlike philosophy or theology, requires that meditations result in actions, deeds that enliven intimate engagements in the world. It draws us deeper into right action by getting us more deeply in touch with the gifts that we have to give" (Achenbaum 2007, 126). Clearly, spirituality to Achenbaum goes beyond seeking inner peace and has a broader impact. It encourages humans to become "citizen pilgrims" (Achenbaum 2007, 126), or in Fonda's words "Pilgrims of the Future" (Fonda 2011, 253), dedicated to improving the world. Evidently, the interconnection between reflection and generativity converges with Fonda's first and second maxim, shaping a meaningful and transformative journey of ascending the staircase, promoting contemplation on whether it symbolizes a significant cosmic evolution.

Building upon this foundation, the exploration of spirituality gains further depth when viewed through the lens of Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard believes that the journey inward is the key to unlocking cosmic evolution. The grand idea behind his evolutionary theory, known as the Omega Point, is to "...[k]now why we had evolved" from our primate ancestors to the human beings we are today (Bowdon 2011). Therefore, as humans start living in a state of reflectiveness, pondering on the big question, they step into the journey of evolution; "...[a]n ascent towards consciousness" (Teilhard 1958, 258). A more contemporary comprehension of what Teilhard denotes as 'consciousness,' is what Tolle refers to as the very "essence" of each person (Tolle 2003, 13). However, Teilhard claims that ascension towards the ultimate consciousness cannot be achieved through individualism, it is a journey of collective efforts. He claims that "Omega, in its ultimate principle, can only be a distinct Center radiating at the core of a system of center" (Teilhard 1958, 263). In other words, Omega becomes the focal point where the hoard of consciousness concentrates on the essence of each individual's unique center. Put simply, as we grow older, we are not just evolving individually, but we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Therefore, being generative allows for the growth and development of the entire cosmos.

Teilhard's effort to unite science and religion offers a valuable lesson. He sought to describe the evolution of the universe as a unified process, where all of history progresses towards ultimate unity (Schmidt 2018). He was a remarkable visionary who observed the world in flux and was bold enough to develop a holistic understanding of the earth and its constituents and questioned the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church (Schmidt 2018). He found it hard to accept the literal truth of the Bible's account of creation and the fall which claims that the "whole human race takes its origin from one protoparent, Adam" (Schmidt 2018). As this proposition lacked scientific grounding, Teilhard sought to reconcile his Christian faith with the scientific understanding of evolution; hence, the birth of Omega Point as the final state of unity (Schmidt 2018). Nevertheless, his research was deeply rooted in Christianity, a faith historically associated with a patriarchal structure, referring to a social system where power and authority are held by men. In light of this, it becomes crucial to understand why Fonda, who advocates for a world free of patriarchy, would step into her spiritual journey through Christianity.

As she began her "soul journey," Fonda found it difficult to accept the traditional Judeo-Christian view of women's role (Fonda 2005, 566). She expresses discomfort with certain Christian beliefs, particularly the notion that "...[m]an was God's principal creation, with women (Eve, fashioned from Adam's rib) a mere derivative afterthought." She boldly asserts her disapproval since "women as the cause of man's downfall" has been the assumption permitting "men throughout the ages to regard women with suspicion and misogyny" (Fonda 2005, 567). What moved her, however, were the very early Christian communities "like those in the Gospel of Thomas and the Secret Gospel of Mark, and the book of John – who saw themselves as seekers more than believers: who felt that *experiencing* the divine was more important than mere *belief* in the divine. According to them, Jesus preached that each individual

has the potential to *embody* God” (Fonda 2005, 567). The emphasis here is on “each individual” who *seeks* spiritual experiences and can embody the divine rather than mere dogmatic belief.

Since early Christians were influenced by Greco-Roman philosophy such as Plato, the Gospel of Thomas for instance, is likely to resonate with their philosophical inclinations specifically in its emphasis on personal introspection, self-discovery, and the pursuit of spiritual truth (Patterson 2023). As seekers, they valued the direct experience of God and believed in the inner transformation, exploring the depths of one’s being. Rather than viewing God as distant and separate, they believed that the divine presence could be realized within themselves (Patterson 2023). I believe such a view fostered a profound sense of personal responsibility and agency in matters of spiritual growth. It strongly encourages individuals to engage actively in the process of transformation rather than passively awaiting divine intervention. This active engagement is echoed in Tornstam’s concept of Gerotranscendence; the pursuit of a full spiritual life (Tornstam 2011).

Conclusion: Ascending the Staircase of Life

Jane Fonda’s life doctrine gives us a glimpse into her views on the paradigms of aging; a transformative journey, full of metamorphosis. A journey that Joseph Campbell – the renowned American writer, and mythologist – called the Hero’s Journey: “In its most elementary form, a hero goes on an adventure, emerges victorious from a defining crisis, and then returns home changed for the better” (Haupt 2023). It turned out that what had begun as a narrative project to be displayed on her 60th birthday was a means of self-preparation: “I was preparing myself for myself” (Fonda 2011, 256). Fonda was able to unlock the creative power of a deeper unconscious within or to borrow Campbell’s words, she was able to “find the source of life” (Campbell 1988, 8:05). According to Campbell, every human undergoes a “fundamental experience” at some point in life that is the “basic motif of a hero’s journey” (Campbell 1988, 7:37). Leaving the conditions of her past life, and courageously discovering her true nature has been the fundamental experience in Fonda’s life. It is as if once she learned who she really was, she realized what was truly important and meaningful; embracing the hero within her. In doing so, she began to write “[a]n empowered and self-aware narrative of aging” (Mira 2018).

Fonda holds a sophisticated view of legacy as stated in her interview with *CBS Sunday Morning*, where she claimed that her “kids and her grandkids” are her legacy (Fonda 2023, 22:30). It is no wonder why she tries to safeguard the planet for the well-being of all living beings, including her descendants while passing down values and principles to the young generation. While she may see her children and her grandchildren as her legacy, her life’s journey, living true to her destiny as a hero, has subtly and significantly challenged the conventional paradigms of aging. Her legacy allows us to reframe the way we perceive the aging process with all its complexities. Her introspective journey helped her reconnect with her authentic nature as showcased by Susan Lacy – the director of the HBO documentary *Jane Fonda in Five Acts*. It starts with her father Henry, and moves on to her three husbands, Vadim, Hayden, and Turner. Lacy masterfully encapsulates Fonda’s life story, dedicating Act Five to Jane. The last Act depicts Fonda’s ability to create enough internal space to be able to allow all parts of herself to co-exist despite their contradictions. Her dedication to personal growth forms her primary principle in reshaping the aging narrative.

Fonda invites people to think of aging as a journey of evolution with integrity. In addition to fostering a sense of purpose and meaning in life, it ensures that the younger generation is equipped to meet life’s challenges with resilience and wisdom. Fonda herself embodies generativity simply through the act of going beyond, giving over to a cause bigger than herself. Ever since the early days of her activism in the 60s, she has aspired to evolve and make a difference beyond her immediate sphere of influence. Her passion for activism is a potent reminder that each individual has the capacity to leave “personal footprints” behind which they can confidently step into as they live their Third Acts (Fonda 2011, 257). To her, aging

is more than just developing personally, it is also about contributing to the collective well-being of society.

From her vantage point, the narrative of aging can be seen as a natural process of evolution, not just physically, but also emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually, and by embracing this journey one can avoid the all too familiar arch; the narrative of decline. Viewing life through the staircase metaphor leads to a novel interpretation of “the self; relationships to others; and the cosmic level of nature, time and the universe” (Lewis 2023, 93). In other words, we have the opportunity to embark on a profound inner exploration and have the power to shape a narrative that we see fit. This shift in mindset empowers individuals to embrace the chances and hardships, using them as stepping stones towards self-discovery. Therefore, “To grow old is a great privilege [...] with mind and heart set on retrospect, it is natural [...] to find oneself on the upward course of a steep hill” (Erikson 1982, 90).

As a multifaceted figure, Fonda has always faced both admiration and criticism from feminists. Many scholars might question whether her emphasis on growth and wisdom is a result of her business interests or if it truly stems from her sincere desire to comprehend the nuances of aging. Despite her privileged background, her experiences seem to indicate otherwise, as she struggled with internal conflict in almost all stages of her life. Her openness about every facet of her life emphasizes how genuine and authentic she is. Her narrative is a poignant reminder that privilege does not equate to fulfillment. Such a perspective challenges the conventional notion of privilege, especially in an industry notoriously youth-obsessed. Therefore, I believe it is essential to view her within the context of her own life, acknowledging her experiences, struggles, and accomplishments.

Living with Fonda through her philosophy for more than a year, I realized that embarking upon a self-journey knows no bounds –available to all irrespective of age, gender, social status, and economic position. What truly matters is how one takes advantage of the passing of years in pursuit of self-fulfillment. In doing so we can harness the concept of time to serve us and redefine aging as a weapon that empowers anyone at any stage of life. The process of aging does not begin at midlife, nor does it imply the loss of youth. It is a process that starts at birth, and cannot be defied, prevented, or reversed – intricately interwoven into the very fabric of existence, enriching the cycle of human experience. Embracing this journey entails confronting destiny, fate, karma –or any other name one may assign to it; it represents the pinnacle of pure acceptance, revealing the inner essence of our existence. Jane Fonda exemplifies this ethos through the embodiment of the staircase metaphor, celebrating life and death and epitomizing the essence of a soul. Fully immersed in life, she has a deep awareness of its highs and lows. Sourced from within, she radiates a profound self-acceptance that personifies wholeness.

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