

Poised to Pass the Torch

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We who work at the interstices of the arts, humanities, and gerontology owe a great debt to David D. Van Tassel (1928-2000), an academic entrepreneur who cherished, generated, and nurtured creative thinking.¹ With Peter Stearns, David Hackett Fischer, and Peter Laslett, Van Tassel championed historical gerontology as a subfield of social/cultural history, intellectually and institutionally. The initiative transcended disciplinary boundaries. A sizable grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1974 enabled Van Tassel to invite senior scholars, rising stars in the humanities, and pre-docs like me to his Case Western (CWRU) campus and to Gerontological Society of America (GSA) meetings to join gerontologists in exchanging ideas about cross-fertilizing the humanities and aging. Two books resulted (Spicker, Woodward, and Van Tassel; Van Tassel). To sustain momentum, Van Tassel convened another conference which issued *Old Age in a Bureaucratic Society* (Van Tassel and Stearns).

Van Tassel used well-established academic structures to strengthen the interdependence of the sciences and the humanities and arts in aging studies. He co-founded CWRU's Center on Health and Aging. In concert with gero-bibliophile and past GSA president Joseph T. Freeman, MD, (as well as with critical support from Robert H. Binstock and Charles Gaitz, MD,) Van Tassel secured a Standing Committee on the Arts and Humanities, thereby affirming GSA's recognition of this burgeoning enterprise. Van Tassel started the *Human Values and Aging Newsletter* (1975). The publication became *Aging and the Human Spirit*, which he edited with Tom Cole and Carter Williams; it is now edited by Rick Moody. Van Tassel also co-edited with Tom Cole and Bob Kastenbaum the first *Handbook of Aging and the Humanities* (1992).

David Van Tassel persuaded me to redouble efforts to secure tenure while contributing to research and teaching on aging. After writing *Old Age in the New Land* (1978) for historians and *Shades of Gray* (1983) for gerontologists, however, I discarded this Janus-faced mask. I skipped

meetings of the Organization of American Historians, while assuming leadership positions at GSA and other institutions in the aging network, including the National Council on the Aging and the American Society on Aging's journal, *Generations*.

At sixty-six, I look back on a good run. A biography of Bob Butler (2013) is my sixth book; I have two more in me, to be written with Rick Moody. Winning GSA's Kent Award, the first bestowed on someone in the humanities, is my proudest achievement. I have had my share of disappointments, including failed efforts at aging-related, interdisciplinary institution-building. Only two dissertations under my supervision focused on gerontology. "Aging" remains a tough sell, I think, even as Baby Boomers enter Golden Pond. Universities abandon interdisciplinary programs that prove unprofitable (Bass). That age discrimination and bigotry remain ubiquitous gives rise to extreme disparities in health and income, to isolation and marginalization, and to elder abuse.

Poised to pass the baton to the next generation of researchers and educators, I appreciate this opportunity to advise those who will redraw the intellectual and organizational bonds between gerontology and the arts and humanities. You must modify game plans designed and executed by Van Tassel, and then by my cohort, for we preferred liminal, incremental campaigns to promote the arts and humanities in domains dominated by bio-medical and social-behavioral scientists. The time has come for bolder action, for initiatives that galvanize this journal's readership.

Aging studies has several strengths. First, it emphasizes interpretations of the *meanings* of becoming and being older. Such significance cannot be measured in reductionist, linear models; journeys become fully manifest amid the contrapuntal, contradictory, and often mundane contingencies and ironies of human existence. Second, aging studies promises to attack, if not eradicate, ageism. Third, it pools the intellectual and social capital of critics and commentators in North America and Western Europe.

The next wave of researchers and teachers should extend existing lines of inquiry. We need more life-course perspectives to ascertain how the Longevity Revolution has transmogrified meanings and experiences

from womb to tomb. Far more attention must be paid to the Fourth Age. Artists and experts in the humanities must challenge policy-makers, health-care professionals, individuals, and families as we come to terms with the moral, ethical, and social dimensions of end-of-life issues.

I hope, although I am not confident, that aging studies will fare better than most gerontology programs in higher education. Meanwhile, there is much to gain in partnering with elementary schools and older adults in community colleges. Do not abandon negotiations with GSA and the American Society on Aging, which have been indispensable in sharpening and disseminating the fervor that David Van Tassel enthused. Above all, celebrate creativity and the good ideas that matter, for only they will prevail and last. If adherents of aging studies fulfill their promise and generate compelling arguments and debates, scholars in other disciplines and professions will take heed and join the dialog.

Good luck in moving forward

NOTES

¹ Branching out from American studies and his commitment to aging research, Van Tassel advocated quantitative approaches to history and grounding urban studies into a cross-disciplinary domain. He pioneered “applied history” to prepare doctoral students for employment in government, private agencies, and the independent sector. Van Tassel also launched History Day to stimulate interest among high school students.

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