Conclusion: aging and sustained purpose

The knowledge of life...which we grown-ups have to pass on to the younger generation will not be expressed thus: ‘Reality will soon give way before your ideals,’ but ‘Grow into your ideals, so that life may never rob you of them.’

Albert Schweitzer (1925: 102)

It was more than ten years ago that I first wondered why the many elderly people I saw at demonstrations were excluded from the 'received wisdom' of what aging is and should be. Eventually, these vague notions became articulated in more sophisticated academic language. Throughout this time, however, my guiding interest has been the question: does growing up necessarily mean growing out of our ideals? The message of this book can be simply summarized in the one-word answer: No. Psychological development and the commitment to work for social change are not antithetical. Indeed, in the lives of these fifteen people, these two processes have been one and the same.

Western psychology, not surprisingly, tends to reflect the values of Western capitalist ideology. Nowhere is this more true than in its theories of aging; much of the literature describes the later stages of life as a time of disengagement, disillusion, alienation and hopelessness. In Levinson’s words, it is a time of ‘preparing for...death...liv[ing] in its shadow, and at its call’ (1978: 38–39). If this is an accurate description of how some people experience the end of their lives, we as a society must ask why this is so. Mental health in old age can and should mean more than the mere absence of depression and illness. Particularly given changing demography, it is now more important than ever that society regard its elder citizens, and that they regard themselves, not as a social problem but as a vital resource. Perhaps they would not ‘live at death’s call’ if they felt that they still had important work in this life. Those who are advanced in their years are also advanced in their experience.

For the old to experience their lives as having meaning and purpose is important not only to them, and to ourselves as individuals, but also to ourselves as a society. As Simone de Beauvoir reminds us:
the meaning or the lack of meaning that old age takes on in any given society puts that whole society to the test, since it is this that reveals the meaning or the lack of meaning of the entirety of the life leading to that old age (1970: 16).

Old age is the culmination, the final chapter, of life. By denying that phase of life its due integrity, everyone suffers, for integrity is denied to the whole of the life cycle.

It is not only, nor even primarily, of academic interest to me that there exist positive models of successful aging. I am always inspired to see people who have tried throughout their lives to improve the world, particularly when these efforts are conducted in an environment which offers little reward for such dedication, and which instead marginalizes and seeks to alienate those who engage in these struggles. Through my involvement with this project I have become increasingly aware of just how many unsung heroes and heroines there are, often in the most unexpected places. One needs only to open one’s eyes to see they are there.

Ultimately, then, what can be said of these fifteen lives, apart from that they have been lived in this particular way? These men and women have been and are still fully involved with living, knowing that even after they die, the fights in which they have been engaged will persist. Unlike many others of their age who feel they no longer belong to society, they continue to have a strong purpose in life, a reason for living. They have sustained their commitment to socialism, and their commitment, in turn, has sustained them.