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Strengthening intergenerational relationships amid societal changes

Instead of a three-stage life, there is a need to reconfigure one's life plan to a multi-stage life - a new concept that will have much more flexibility and many more transitions.



TUE, MAR 12, 2019 - 5:50 AM

KANWALJIT SOIN



One of the unintended consequences of the three-stage life is that it has led to an institutional separation of the young, the middle-aged and the old. The multi-stage life will reverse this isolation by generations, because age will not coincide with one's stage in life. FILE PHOTO

FOR many of us, life just happens. We are born, we go to school and then start work. Most of us get married and have children and grandchildren. We live our three score and 10 years which is about 611,000 hours in three stages - school, work and retirement. This is the present concept of our life course.

But without us recognising it consciously, a great change has come about. Life expectancy has been increasing at a fast pace. The length of our life has been increasing three months each year or about three years every decade. On a daily basis, life expectancy is increasing by four hours, and while we are sitting here enjoying ourselves, our lives have been lengthened by quite a few minutes. This lengthening of our lives is real and is affecting all of us. Singapore has been ranked third in the world for the longest average life expectancy and second in the world for

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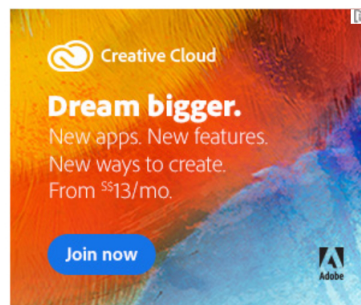
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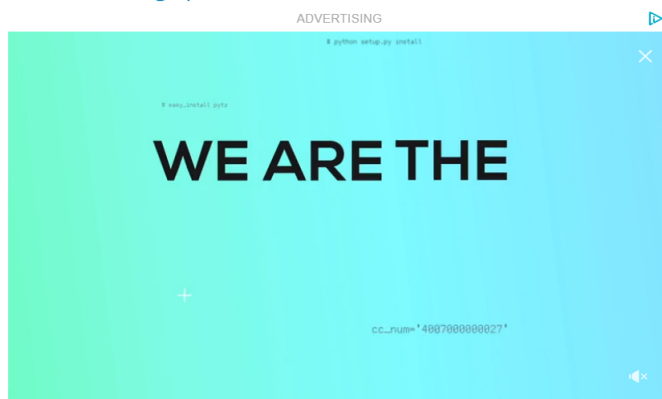
For the first time in history, many people now being born can expect to live eight or nine decades. Babies born since 2000 in countries with long life expectancies (like Japan and Singapore) will celebrate their 100th birthday and more. There are 1,300 centenarians alive today in Singapore and counting. So dear friends, miraculously, many of us, especially the younger ones, can expect to become centenarians and super centenarians. Living to 100 years adds up to about 873,000 hours. So what are we going to do with this gift of a longer life - this gift of time - an extra 262,000 hours from our three score and 10 years?

Right now, many of us are living our lives in a three-stage linear life plan. This three-stage life assigns specific tasks to fixed time periods. Thus, we are educated and trained for the labour market in our youth, we then work for a living in the middle years of our life, and finally spend the rest of our years in retirement. Many of us are under the impression that with a longer life, there will be a prolonged period of retirement and so we start worrying about finances and illness. This is not the right course of action to take.



The reality is that people are becoming chronologically older but biologically younger. People are younger for longer and thus the standard chronological measure of age makes less sense than ever.

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Therefore, we need to reframe our life course and redefine what living longer means. The three stages of the life course are social constructs that have little physiological basis. Unfortunately, age-related roles and responsibilities are determined more by social factors and culture rather than by biology. The longevity dividend has not been fully unlocked because longer lives are being constrained by old-time structures and by gerontophobia - fear of old people and fear of old age.

Instead of a three-stage life, we have to reconfigure our life plan to a multi-stage life. This new concept will have much more flexibility and many more transitions. The 20th century historian Peter Laslett observed that our significantly longer lives invite us to draw up "a fresh map of life". This multi-stage life will consist of breaking down the linearity of our life course and interspersing our lives and careers with periods of

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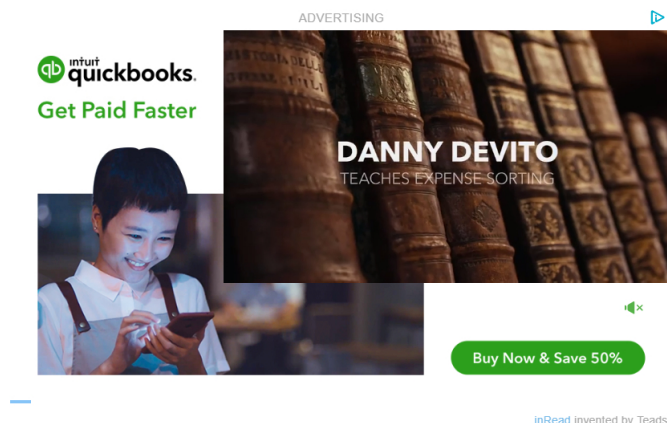
care, work, parenting, volunteering, learning or leisure. This sort of a life plan might allow people to raise children first and then start a career at age 35-40 and to change career paths at any stage in life, or perhaps choose to retire for a while at 35 and then re-enter the workforce later. This variation or other shifts on the traditional trajectories of the life course can offer opportunities to live life fully at all ages and stages, and to contribute to society throughout one's life.

To achieve this new paradigm, there is an urgent need to create changes in individual and institutional attitudes and behaviour. There also have to be systemic changes at the corporate, government and societal levels to enable them to accept and support the new and personalised life course of individuals with all its extra functional decades of life, and thus reap the dividends of longevity.

One of the unintended consequences of the three-stage life is that it has led to an institutional separation of the young, the middle-aged and the old. The multi-stage life will reverse this isolation by generations, because age will not coincide with your stage in life.

Let us look at education - this should not just be for the first stage of life but life-long, and this is being encouraged in Singapore. However, the situation now is that most educational institutions are age-stratified - school, college, polytechnic, university, postgraduate etc. This creates boundaries between ages and encourages ageism. Young people miss out on opportunities to be mentored by older people while older people lose the opportunity of interacting with younger people. Multi-stage life - education throughout different ages of life - will break down age boundaries and encourage cross-generational blending.

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Schools, colleges and universities will have to create spaces where young, middle-aged and older people from all walks of life can acquire knowledge and skills together and get to know each other enough to build mutual respect and meaningful friendships, and thus do away with ageism. One practical example of this common space, where all generations can learn something together, is in the study of space exploration - this can include schoolchildren, young adults and older people.

Let us now look at the work arena. Technology and globalisation are disruptive forces but so is longevity. People are working into their 70s and even 80s. For this trend to strengthen, some conditions are necessary.

Older people should be offered the option of working part-time or retraining for other types of work. The organisation should recognise the value of experience and human capital and organise the transfer of skills between generations.

Lifelong learning has to be the norm for all. 2018 was a landmark year for Singapore as the number of those over 65 became equal to the number of those under 15. This means that households have fewer children and more grandparents and great-grandparents. We are seeing the emergence of four generations within a family living

at the same time. Even if they are not in the same household, it can create opportunities for older generations to challenge and mentor the young and for the young to support the old.

As older people live longer and healthier lives, and as they continue to work or volunteer their services, they are creating human, financial and social capital. Social capital refers to the creation of relationships among persons that facilitate and enhance their actions and interactions. For example, grandparents play an important role in creating and protecting the family's social capital in times of conflict - for example, divorce - and in times of peace, in value transmission, care and support of family members.

Since WINGS is about older women, I would like to end with a grandmother story. From a biological purpose point of view, let us now ponder on the fact that more than one-third of a woman's life is spent in the post-fertile period. What evolutionary purpose or relevance can this have? One rationale for this phenomenon is explained by the "grandmother hypothesis".

In all primates and mammals, the young, after weaning, collect food for themselves. This does not happen in the human baby. Grandmothers confer an evolutionary advantage to the human race. How do they do that? They gather food to feed the babies and the little ones and it has been shown that having grandmothers around reduces child mortality quite considerably and thus gives the babies a long-protected time to grow large brains. Also because grandmas look after the little ones, young reproductive females are freed of this chore and can instead have more babies. Thus, because of grandmothers, humans have had the opportunity to develop smarter brains and also enjoy longer lifespans than apes.

- **The writer, a consultant orthopaedic & hand surgeon, is the founder president of WINGS - 'Women's Initiative for Ageing Successfully'. She was a Nominated Member of Parliament of Singapore from 1992 to 1996.**
- **This is an abridged version of her address at the Celebrating Women of WINGS fundraising lunch on March 9.**


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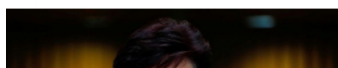
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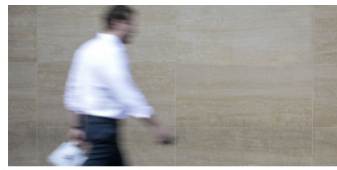
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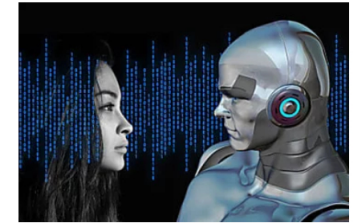
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