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Generativity in Older Age: A Challenge for Universities of the Third Age (U3A)

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This paper discusses the ways in which university programs for older people should change to cater to the interests and concerns of generative older people. We describe university programs offered at present, underlining their emphasis on personal growth and on learning for the sake of learning. We argue that these programs are not entirely suitable for generative older people, who are eager to contribute to the social contexts in which they participate. The paper suggests that more instrumental, intergenerational, practical, and academically challenging programs are required to satisfy the training needs of generative older people.

In stark contrast to the stereotypes that link older age to passivity and dependency, the newer generations of older people often have active life styles and are keen to continue playing key roles in their families and communities. One of the aspects of this active aging paradigm (Fernández Ballesteros, 2009) is the participation of older people in both formal and nonformal learning activities. As a result, the number and variety of educational programs addressed to older people have increased dramatically in the last few decades.

These educational programs expand the concept of lifelong learning. This term was coined to express the need for educational policies for a learning society (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1972). But most of its practical applications have been related to the retraining of workers in professional contexts to adapt their skills profile to the changes that affect jobs and the labor markets in general (Walters, 1997). The concept has different meanings, but the main aim is to reach all social groups to reduce social inequalities—not only in childhood and adolescence (by promoting compulsory education), but also in adulthood (by providing more professional education) and postretirement (Evans, 2006).

Universities play an important part in this model of lifelong learning and education by offering people training in particular areas of expertise regardless of their age. Although it has been argued that universities should be pedagogically and strategically oriented to produce trained professionals ready to succeed in the labor market (Tynjala, Valimaa, & Sarja, 2003), in a broader...
sense they are also agents of socialization and personal development. In addition to their teaching and research functions, university objectives should include a commitment to the transferring and spreading of scientific and artistic knowledge throughout society and to the promotion of critical thinking and reflection. These objectives have to be framed inside the lifelong learning movement and must take into account the new demographic and social characteristics of the society, in particular the increasing longevity and numbers of older adults (Winckler, 2008).

In the last few decades, universities have offered a variety of educational programs for older people and in Europe, the concept of Universities for the Third Age seems to be fully consolidated. However, the changing profile of older adults poses a real challenge for these university programs. In this article, we discuss the ways in which these programs can adapt to the needs of new generations of older people.

**WHAT DO UNIVERSITIES OFFER OLDER PEOPLE?**

At present, the term “University for the Third Age” (U3A) encompasses a rather heterogeneous range of courses and educational opportunities for older people, which nevertheless share certain attributes. The programs are organized and designed for older learners, usually of postretirement age. There are no entrance qualifications or a competitive selection of candidates based on educational or other merits; usually, the only requirements are a minimum age of 50 or 55 and a desire to learn. Nor are there any examinations to test what has been learned; satisfaction with the course or class attendance are the most frequent means used to evaluate the success of the program. Accordingly, students do not obtain any kind of professional qualification. Unlike regular higher education or the traditional way of understanding lifelong learning (Jamieson, 2007), the aim of U3A programs is not to prepare learners for the labor market or to enhance or update their professional skills. Instead, U3A programs offer opportunities for socializing, staying active, and enjoying the process of learning. Additionally, participants in U3A attend courses for free or pay only a token fee.

Aside from these common features, there are a great variety of academic and methodological approaches to U3A. Broadly speaking, two different models of U3A have been distinguished (Swindell, 1993): the British and the French models.

The British model dates back to the early 1980s and then spread to other English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. It emphasizes informal, autonomous self-help groups grounded on the idea that retired people have a lifetime of experience and a vast amount of knowledge which can be taken advantage of in order to teach their peers. Accordingly, instructors are not usually college professors, but rather older students with specialized knowledge or skills related to the topic taught. And the emphasis is on participative methodologies rather than academic lecturing. The courses are also led by older students with little or no relationship with the universities. The courses are not organized on an academic basis, and usually there are no terms or preestablished syllabuses. Groups meet in public buildings (or even at homes) and learn what they decide is interesting and worth learning. Usually, learning groups are not only self-managed but also self-financed. They pay a small amount to a coordinating institution that offers common resources such as a library, newsletters, or contacts with other groups with similar interests.

In contrast to this bottom-up, relatively informal structure, the French tradition of U3A is much more academic and top-down. This approach to U3A is a natural extension of regular
universities to older learners. Set up in the early 1970s thanks to the pioneering work led by Pierre Vellas at the University of Toulouse, the French model involves a much greater participation of the university in the organization and development of courses. This model, has proved particularly popular in continental Europe and Asia. It usually consists of a series of lectures given by university teachers in university classrooms with the teaching facilities provided by the organizing institution, which, in most cases, also contributes to funding the program. The lecture schedule follows the academic calendar, and, in most cases, is combined with extramural activities such as excursions and cultural visits. Since the 1990s, an even more university-oriented type of U3A has proliferated. These programs generally involve three or four-year replicas of regular degrees in selected subject areas and are tailored to older target audiences. Such tailoring generally means lowering the workload and simplifying the content to make the subject accessible to a heterogeneous (and usually less academically trained) public. These programs are designed and taught by university staff who adapt the organization, methodologies, and contents of regular degree courses to the needs and abilities of older students. In some cases, older students may even attend regular university courses, sharing classrooms with younger students and, thus, adding an intergenerational ingredient to the program. However, unlike their younger counterparts, these older students do not participate in evaluative activities or receive marks. Overall, in contrast to the British model, the role of older people in the French U3A model is often limited to attending classes. Although the older people may be on a program’s advisory board, they have little control over the design of the program.

Regardless of the model, the aims of U3A are common: to enhance the quality of life of older people, to offer the elderly the chance to engage in satisfying activities, and to promote the personal fulfilment and social integration of the elderly. In fact, the U3A movement has been a huge success. Since the first program was launched in the early 1970s, the number of programs has increased steadily. Today, they can be found in countries as diverse as Finland (Yenerall, 2003); Italy (Principi & Lemura, 2009); Spain (Alfageme, 2007); Australia (Swindell, 1993); Taiwan (Huang, 2005); and Japan and Canada (Hori & Cusack, 2006). Although in the United States the term U3A is not generally used, similar programs organized by the Institutes of Learning in Retirement (Kim & Merriam, 2004) are available. As in the British U3A model, these programs are community-based and often managed by the older students themselves. However, most of them are affiliated to universities, as in the French model.

This success has been confirmed by research into the benefits of participation in U3A. These studies systematically show that people evaluate their experience of U3A in very positive terms. Personal growth and satisfaction drawn from the process of learning are the benefits most frequently mentioned. For instance, Alfageme (2007) found that a sample of older university students ranked educational issues (such as increasing knowledge or discovering things that did not know) as the main personal outcomes of attendance. Also, over half of his respondents stated that their personal wellbeing had improved. Similarly, the study by Villar, Pinazo, Triado, Celdrán, & Solé (2010) found that satisfaction and enjoyment were the two most valued benefits of attending an U3A, closely followed by an increased feeling of usefulness. Overall, the enjoyment extracted from learning and seeking knowledge for its own sake is a key aspect for older students (Kim & Merriam, 2004).

Apart from satisfaction and personal growth, participation in U3A may have other benefits such as expanding social networks and gaining more social support programs (Mehotra, 2003; Montoro, Pinazo, & Tortosa, 2007; Villar, 2003). Furthermore, some authors (e.g.,
Mehotra, 2003) suggest that higher education implies maintaining and improving cognitive functioning. Although this seems reasonable, and, in fact, some participants do perceive this kind of benefit (see, for instance, Villar, Pinazo, Triadó, Celdrán, & Sole, 2011). However, so far, no clear empirical evidence has emerged of the effects of participation in U3A on cognitive functioning in older age.

The approach to U3A that is based on enhancing participants’ satisfaction, social involvement, and personal growth is in tune with positive views of aging such as life-span perspectives (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998; Boerner & Joop, 2007). From this point of view, older age is seen as a life stage in which people engage in adaptive efforts to maintain their positive qualities, compensate for losses, and even experience further gains. The result of these efforts, and a key criterion for successful aging, is the preservation of a positive self-concept and the maintenance of wellbeing. So life-span approaches and education in older age share a common basis: an optimistic attitude towards the strengths and capabilities of older people.

However, despite this optimistic view and the many notable benefits that U3A can offer older people, the present approach to U3A may still represent a limited view of education in older age. The present approach may even fall short of the expectations and potential of some older people. As described above, the paradigm of U3A, and particularly the French model, conceives education in older age as a leisure-related, self-oriented pursuit aimed at enhancing feelings of satisfaction. Nevertheless, this approach undervalues the potential and desire of older students (or at least, some of them) to acquire new knowledge and skills not just for the sake of learning but to apply them actively in their daily life to solve problems and to increase their contribution in the social contexts in which they participate: an education that is both outwardly and inwardly oriented, guided by both instrumental and expressive motives. In this change towards a more socially relevant role of the educational opportunities offered to older people by universities, the emergence of concepts such as generativity in older age could help to understand the new and more ambitious educational needs of people in the latest stage of life.

**THE CHALLENGE OF GENERATIVITY**

The concept of generativity appeared in the stage theory of psychological development proposed by Erik Erikson (Erikson, 1963, 1982). His theory divides the life span into eight stages associated with eight different age-graded psychosocial challenges or crises. If the challenge is solved successfully, a new competence is added to the self, increasing its maturity and strength.

Generativity is the issue that people encounter in middle adulthood, once the crises of identity and intimacy have been overcome (in adolescence and young adulthood respectively). Generativity is defined as the concern to establish, guide, and ensure the wellbeing of next generations, and it can be expressed in multiple forms. Maybe parenthood is the most typical one, but generativity also includes other kinds of productive, creative, and altruistic activities such as caring for dependant people, educating and mentoring younger generations, producing services or goods, or being involved in civic and political issues. Generativity implies the individual’s commitment to the preservation and enhancement of social contexts in which they participate and to the society as a whole. According to Erikson, failure to attain generativity leads to a situation of meaningless and stagnation, making it more difficult to maintain integrity, which is the developmental task associated with older age.
When Erikson put forward his theory in the 1950s, he associated generativity with middle adulthood. Today, however, there are reasons for thinking that it may also play an important role in later life. One of these reasons is demography. First, due to the delay in marriage age and the difficulty of becoming economically independent, a significant part of children stay in their parents’ household far longer than in the past. For instance, in Europe the percentage of people over 50 living with a child in the same household ranges from around 15–20% in Scandinavia to more than 50% in the Mediterranean countries. And even when children become independent, they usually choose to live very close to their parents (Kohli, Küнемund, & Lüdicke, 2005). As a result, childbearing and parental responsibilities in many cases tend to extend far beyond middle adulthood. Secondly, the increase in longevity means that three or even four generations are now expected to share a significant part of their lives together. These three- or four-generation families represent around 70% of all families in Europe (Kohli et al., 2005). Consequently, the number of grandparents has risen, as has the number of years they perform that role and their relevance inside the families, including caring for grandchildren (Szinovacz, 1998).

In addition to these demographic changes, the profile of older adults has also changed. Today, a significant part of older people enjoy relatively good health; they are better educated than in the past, many have a stable income thanks to public or private retirement pensions, and, as they are outside the labor market, they have far more free time than in previous life stages. Therefore, older people today are more likely to want to lead a lifestyle similar to that of middle adulthood including activities and concerns related to generativity.

This increasing relevance of generativity in older age was hinted at by Erikson in his last writings. He coined the concept of grand-generativity (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986), which he related to the support older people offer and receive and to their keenness to leave a legacy and perpetuate their values in the next generations. There is also some empirical evidence that generative concerns are not only high in older age, but may even be comparable to those of middle adults (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993; Sheldon & Kasser, 2001).

The focus of generativity in older people’s contributions brings the concept close to others such as productive aging, defined as “any activity by an older individual that contributes to produce goods or services, or develops the capacity to produce them, whether or not the individual is paid for this activity” (Bass & Caro, 2001, p. 39). As in the case of generativity, productive aging makes visible the often hidden contributions of older people, highlighting their importance as a family and community asset, rather than as a burden or a drain on social resources. However, unlike productive aging, which is biased towards economics and the determination of the market value of older people’s contributions, generativity offers a more balanced picture of social and personal growth, since it is embedded in a theory of individual development. The involvement of older people in generative activities aids the social development of the contexts in which they participate; and, in turn, this generative activity facilitates the attainment of a higher level of maturity. The relationship between personal and social development becomes circular, as is shown in Figure 1. The type of generative activity in which the individual can be involved depends both on their personal competencies and the availability or opportunities provided by the social context.

The active participation of older people in society has been institutionally recognized and is part of the current rhetoric and policies on aging. For instance, the inclusion of older people in social, economic, cultural and civic activities was endorsed by the World Health Organization (2002) as a framework for policy proposals and the development of programs aimed at
enhancing the quality of life of older people. In the same vein, the participation of older people in society and development is included in the first priority direction of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging (United Nations Organization, 2002), which emerged from the Second World Assembly on Aging.

Taking generativity into account is a challenge for education addressed to older people. Education and capacity building are key elements for channelling generative concerns, aided older people to engage in generative activities at their highest capacity. To achieve this goal, they will need a specialized type of education, such as that provided by universities. However, one may wonder if the current university programs for older people cater for the actual needs of generative older people. As described above, U3A universities give opportunities for personal development and provide a highly satisfactory experience for their participants. However, they lack the instrumental element necessary for people who are looking for a way to obtain new skills and knowledge or to enrich those they already possess—thus, be better prepared to engage in generative activities. Generativity in older age creates the need for educational programs in which older people learn something that goes beyond the process of learning (however important this process is); they need to develop competencies that can be applied in social contexts such as the family, the labor market, or the community. This is how generativity in older age challenges the traditional involvement of universities and other educational institutions in older age education. So, accepting the generative nature of older age requires a change in the nature of education provided in older age, at least in the way in which it has been conceived by U3A so far.

WHAT KINDS OF PROGRAM SHOULD UNIVERSITIES OFFER FOR GENERATIVE OLDER PEOPLE?

The first implication of generativity in older age for the design of educational programs involves the very idea of segregating courses addressed only to older people. As mentioned above, this practice means designing watered-down versions of programs or degrees that are offered in their full version to regular (that is, younger) students. U3A programs do not have the same status as mainstream university courses; however, if generative older people share motives, capabilities, concerns, and activities with people who are in other life stages—and particularly with middle-aged people—it makes sense that generative older people should be interested in the same type of educational programs as their younger counterparts.
Perhaps, then, generative older people do not need so many programs tailored following a model that tends to ignore generative concerns. Generative older people are more likely to be interested in, and feel more comfortable in, programs that are not adapted for a specific age group but which consider the specific use of the competencies involved. Professional accreditation is probably unnecessary because most generative older people will not want to enter or reenter the labour market; but a commitment to the real-life use of what has been learnt in the program seems essential.

From this point of view, intergenerational programs make absolute sense for generative older people. Recently, many U3A that follow the French model have included intergenerational courses in their curriculum. However, older people tend to play a secondary role in these courses, attending courses in small numbers (generally with a limit of three to five older students per class) and without really participating in evaluative activities or receiving credits or grades. From the generative perspective, this difference no longer makes sense: every participant is a full student on the course regardless of their age. Although it has been argued that intergenerational courses may have drawbacks because the leading role of older people is not guaranteed (Manheimer, Snodgrass, & Moskow-Mckenzie, 1995). Only if younger and older students are treated as equals in terms of rights and responsibilities can the benefits of intergenerational contact (among others, the reduction of stereotypes, improvements in social skills and increased sense of self-worth, as mentioned by Pinazo & Kaplan, 2007), be fully expressed. Besides the intergenerational issue, a generative-oriented design of U3A programs has implications that affect every feature of the program including its objectives, contents, methodology, and evaluation.

As for the objectives, rather than offering knowledge and information, learning in generative old age should be oriented towards developing skills and attitudes. Within the well-known taxonomy of learning objectives that differentiates between conceptual, procedural, and attitudinal goals, traditional U3A programs have tended to overemphasize the conceptual side of learning, providing older students with comprehensive information in a particular knowledge domain. This kind of objective is very important and helps students understand how a part of reality works, but U3A programs should not focus exclusively on the conceptual aspect; both procedural and attitudinal objectives should also be included if programs are to combine personal development with social participation and social development. Procedural objectives determine which skills, or ways of doing, should be attained by the end of the program. They focus on the ways in which knowledge can be applied to solve problems and handle concrete situations, making the training relevant for real-life situations. Thus, procedural objectives guarantee that the consequences of learning are not limited to changes in the learner. Whatever the possible relevance of such inner changes, procedural objectives try to expand the consequences of learning to the way the learner acts and behaves towards a certain domain of reality. Finally, attitudinal objectives complement this view by providing a reflection on the values, personal commitments, and ethical concerns involved in a specific field of knowledge and practical action and trying to direct personal growth accordingly.

Generative concerns and the balance between types of learning objectives require the development of a suitable syllabus. The contents of such generative-oriented programs should aim to reinforce the social roles that older people may play. It may even be possible to find significant new roles for the elderly, enhancing their social participation both in the community (e.g., programs for learning how to develop voluntary roles and civic participation, or train the trainer courses for older people) or in the family (e.g., grandparent training programs or courses for
learning how to care effectively for dependant relatives). In order to reinforce procedural and attitudinal objectives, course content should include activities both inside and (particularly) outside the classroom. Activities outside the classroom help participants to put into practice the skills learned in the courses, either in simulations or in the real-life contexts and situations in which they will be applied after the course. So, if the program is conceived to develop social participation in the community, its design should involve agreements with the organizations that will receive students in their practice period.

Although this kind of content is rarely offered in U3A, there are good examples of courses for older people organized by other institutions, particularly in the area of volunteering. For instance, in the United States, the Legacy Leadership Institutes offer training in civic engagement for people over 50 years. The model includes 45–65 hours of classroom learning followed by an unpaid, supervised 200–450-hour practice period in a community-based organization (Wilson, Steele, Simson, & Harlow-Rosentraub, 2006). In the program, competencies such as communication skills, team management, conflict resolution, leadership, or social policies are included. After the course the students are expected to be involved (and not necessarily on an unpaid basis) in the nonprofit sector. In a similar vein, the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth has sponsored a program called Experience for Initiatives (Brauers & Braun, 2006). The program trains older people to develop four different volunteering roles: as counsellors, initiators of new projects, networkers in community life, and team coordinators. The training consists of a five-month course combining theoretical and practice periods in which participants learn how their local volunteer sector is organized. Participants work on competencies such as networking, group dynamics, communication, and project management. After the course, the Senior Trainers are ready to take part in organizations, initiatives, and projects in the volunteering and educational sectors of their community—individually or in small teams.

As these examples illustrate, educational programs that take into account older people’s generative interests should adapt their objectives and contents and also their methodology. By definition, generative older people are active and eager to put into practice what they learn. So, traditional lecture-oriented teaching methods, which are so widespread in U3A (and particularly, in the programs that follow the French model), make little sense if used exclusively. Lectures have a part to play, but should be combined with more participative methods involving students in their own learning processes, rather than confining them to the role of consumers offered a prepackaged set of knowledge dispensed by an expert, the teacher, who often assumes that older students know nothing or have no competence at all in the topic at hand. Quite the opposite: teachers should take advantage of their older students’ life experiences to enrich the class and to connect what is being learnt with what students already know. Methods such as role-playing, problem solving, class discussions, or even peer-teaching (Brady, Holt, & Welt, 2003; Choi, 2009)—which have been used successfully in U3A following the British model outlined above—should also be part of the methodological repertoire of generativity-oriented U3A programs.

Finally, evaluation is another issue that should be rethought in this new approach to U3A. Traditionally, U3A has been very reluctant to evaluate students’ learning; this makes sense in programs whose objectives are focused on students’ personal growth rather than on the practical application of the course content in other settings. For this kind of subjective outcome, knowing whether students are more or less satisfied with the program, regardless of what they have
learned, seems sufficient. In addition, the reputation of exams as stressful situations—whose results are used to label students as good or bad and to create rankings of academic progress—did not help to establish learning evaluation as an important part of U3A programs. However, if the aim of generativity-oriented U3A is to increase older students’ contributions to the common good by developing competencies that can be applied in real life situations and using tools to solve potentially difficult problems, it will be crucial to test to what extent these competencies have been mastered once the training period is finished. This evaluation should be carried out at least twice in the program. Firstly, during the training process, formative evaluation activities could be implemented to oversee students’ progress. If the progress is not as good as expected, weaknesses should be identified and worked on. The active learning methods recommended for programs of this kind should facilitate the implementation of formative evaluation. Secondly, after the program, we should assess whether students, in accordance with the program’s aims, have increased or improved their contribution to the social contexts in which they participate. We should also assess to what extent the competencies developed in the program are put into practice effectively in those social contexts. Thus, evaluation will provide key feedback about what works and what does not—information that can be used to refine the program.

CONCLUSION: TAKING LEARNING IN OLDER AGE SERIOUSLY

The present article establishes the extent to which generativity in older age challenges the range of university educational programs addressed to older students. After outlining the kind of educational opportunities older people currently find in universities (known as the Universities for the Third Age), we describe areas in which U3A may not be suitable for the new generations of older people. We believe the new generation of older people are more educated and in better health than in the past and, especially, maintain many interests from their earlier lives and are eager to keep on contributing to their families and communities.

We argue that universities, as institutions which play a major role in education for older people, should include in their educational offerings programs that reflect the concerns and needs of generative older people. New programs of this kind would take advantage of the experience of the university in training professionals and their vast educational and teaching resources, while at the same time partnering community-based organizations in offering a curriculum that could be applied in significant real-life activities. Rather than the watered-down versions of regular degrees that have been offered to them in U3A so far, generative older people need academically challenging, specific, and competence-oriented programs that could improve the way in which they contribute to the social contexts in which they already participate or are interested in participating.

In a way, generativity for older people means attaching more importance to the role of learning in older age and, in a broader sense, the role attributed to older people. It requires us to abandon a view in which older people are present-oriented and concerned exclusively with finding enjoyment in what they do. Instead, it requires us to endorse a more complex perspective in which—as well as obtaining personal satisfaction and enhancing personal development through participating in learning activities—older people are motivated by future-oriented and long-term values linked to the development and improvement of the social context in which they live.

However, the promotion of generative-oriented educative programs sponsored by universities does not mean the disappearance or substitution of U3A programs as they are known at present.
The two models can coexist because the profile of older people is far from homogeneous, and not every older person is motivated to the same extent by generative interests.

In our view, there are at least three objectives of education for older people that are present, hierarchically, in any educational activity (see Figure 2). In the first level we find the programs whose major benefit is in terms of satisfaction and enjoyment. These programs generally do not even have a formal or explicit educational aim; they try to promote leisure activities that help older people keep active, have fun, and meet other people. In the second level, educational programs could be more ambitious and try to encourage older people to increase their competencies and knowledge. Apart from being a source of enjoyment and satisfaction, ingredients that should not disappear from any educational program addressed to older people, programs in the second level add the growth dimension, starting from the premise that personal development and improvement is a continuous process that does not stop in older age. As we have argued in this article, the traditional design of most U3A has these objectives of satisfaction and personal growth in mind. Finally, at the third level, we would find the programs that aim to develop competencies that enable older people to contribute to the social contexts in which they participate: that is, generative-oriented programs promoting social development. As we argue, these programs also stimulate personal growth and, obviously, are a source of satisfaction and enjoyment as well.

The hierarchical pyramid-like structure of the three aims reflects the idea that each objective builds on the previous ones, and that every level implies an additional investment of student effort and commitment, interesting a qualitatively different and more restrictive profile of older people. But obviously, every level has its own merits and its own target public. And what is important is to have a range of courses for different types of older students—and to do this without assuming that all older people have the same interests and abilities and seek the same things from an educational program. In this regard, generative-oriented U3A programs are likely to suit better younger, more educated older people who enjoy a relatively good level of health. These factors (age, education, health) are key for predicting the involvement in volunteering and civic activities in older age (Choi, 2003).
In conclusion, generative-oriented university programs provide answers for two of the challenges posed by the new generations of older people. The first is that of finding a suitable social use for the enormous quantity of knowledge and expertise accumulated after decades of involvement in training programs—in the labor market or in diverse life experiences. We, as a learning society, cannot afford to waste these highly valuable assets. The second is the challenge of offering older people significant activities in which they can find meaning: activities aimed at improving the context in which they are involved and which are, at the same time, a means to continue developing personally and to offer a lasting legacy.

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