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**Experiencing Time in Old Age**

What is time? Objectively looked at, time is „everything that can be measured with watches“, as Albert Einstein simply defined once.

The subjective experience of time can refer to various aspects. Already Kant (1781) acknowledged time in the broader sense as a basic dimension of psychological experience.

The sense of time can refer to a time period in the past, the presence or the future.

Time can be spent senselessly (“killing time”) or usefully (“use the time that’s left”), as an expression of the subjective approach to time in an ethically orientated lifestyle.

In the history of psychology - in contrast to today - the subjective research and psychophysics of time was one of the main topics of the young experimental psychology. In the following explanations, I will refer to a dissertation by Wallisch (“time experience in a fast-paced society”, Wallisch, P. University of Chicago HTML Version). In his study, already James (1890) found out that time filled with interesting and multifaceted experiences seems short when experienced but long when remembered. In contrast, time without such experiences seems short when looking back but long when experienced (James, W. “Principles of Psychology, 1890). He conceives the presence as a borderline or saddle from which we slide into the past or the future.

In the assessment of the complexity of subjective time experience, there are different opinions found in the history of the psychological research. Time experi-

ence is assessed as a perception of time (Hoagland 1933), when Ornstein (1969) sees to the contrary time experience as time processing. He understands time processing as a cognitive process in which the sense of time is deduced from changes in the outside world (Ornstein, R.E. "On the Experience of Time. Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1969). To this day, the question has remained unanswered.

At the same time, there is an agreement amongst the researchers on four points. The basic time experience is about

- the experience of synchronism and asynchronism
- the experience of chronological order, the succession of events
- the experience of the presence
- the experience of the duration of time

The biggest part of psychological research was made on the last point, the experience of duration.

In regard to the influencing factors of time experience, age plays a decisive role.

What is age? Old age – seniority – is considered a life period of its own (young seniors 60-75 years; old seniors from 75 years and up), in which there are three basic developmental tasks according to Thomae (1976):

- Dealing with the change of one's own appearance
- Dealing with social integration respectively isolation  
(Children go their own ways, peers pass away)
- Dealing with the finiteness of one's own existence (the aspect of time!)

As an interdisciplinary science, gerontology researches the ageing process and has developed many theories based on panel studies that are very interesting

but would be leading too far away from the actual topic here (Thomae H, Lehr, U. and Kruse, A.).

In regard to time experience, James (1890) referred to the fact that the years accelerate in age. He ascribed this shortened experience to the uniformity of the content of one's memory and the simplified retrospect (quote from Draasima 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Wallisch describes a triple relationship between age and the sense of time.

1. There is a relation between age and the experience of long periods of time; the older the person is, the faster time seems to go by and the shorter time intervals appear. (Walk 1977; Joubert, 1983, 1990)

Whereby that is to be explained is not exactly known.

For this purpose, I would like to make a little excursion into the psychology of age. Kruse (1990) emphasizes the results of empiric gerontology as the potential of age:<sup>2</sup>

- The ability to compromise between the expected and the accomplished.
- The ability to accept life boundaries and at the same time explore new life possibilities.
- The ability and willingness to put the past events and experiences in a broader order and to evaluate them anew.
- The ability to deal with the tasks and demands of life in a mature way due to a high degree of life experience.
- The ability to put one's own needs on hold for the benefit of others
- The ability to focus future-orientated expectations and plans on the near future.
- Dealing with the destinies of other people, a sense of responsibility for the next generation

This shows how complex older people engage in life and how many thoughts they spend on others. One can only guess how fast time flies for them!

2. According to Wallisch, another important influencing factor is attention and activity. The more involved a person is in an absorbing activity, the shorter the time interval seems (Loehlein 1959). Is the person being passive - for example in old age by living through illness – an extreme prolongation of time is experienced (Revers 1949).

3. The more habitual actions are on hand, the shorter the past time appears to be to the person and the faster it seems to go by (Flaberty, 1999).

There are some cognitive theories regarding time experience that understand time experience as a complex information-processing mechanism; we won't go deeper into this now, but rather go into a study in which the phenomenological character of experienced time is elaborated on (Kruse 2000).<sup>3</sup>

The age researcher A. Kruse assumes with Augustine (XI. Book of Confessions) that the past of a person and the future affect the action of each individual in the presence, so that there is a presence of the past and a presence of the future. With the example of a heard piece of music, he works out the contrast between time experience as a continuous occurrence (sonata) and time experience as a structuring power (repetition of the theme).

In the transfer to a person's biography, he found meaningful incisions; some life events or developments portray blips of time around which other events and developments can be arranged. These "knots" can interrupt the continuity of the development and can therefore change the sense of time in its quality. Thereby, the basis for the development of the time horizon can change; one cannot imagine the future any more (Kruse 2000, S. 183) (for example through the death of a life partner or through the loss of health).

So in life retrospect, the memories are not likewise arranged on a time-line. Life appears on the one hand as a continuous occurrence and on the other hand, it is interrupted by meaningful events and developments. According to Kruse, the experience of time is traced back to the consciousness' temporality which is in the process of becoming. Therefore, evaluations of the past and the future can change in the presence again and again. When bitterness and anger regarding a past experience can be overcome, the fear regarding the future will decrease. Kruse draws a distinction between the close future, on which concrete plans are centered, and the distant future that is experienced as unknown. In closing, he lets Ms. Lehr say a word, who declares that the experienced formability vs. unformability is most significant to an elderly person's future life perspective. Lehr sees a trigger for old-age depression in the fact that one's own life situation does not seem to be changeable any more.

Consequently, the freedom of time composition has a high relevance for a creative presence. (Kruse 2000, S. 195, q.v. Bergson (1994)<sup>4</sup> .

### **Experiencing Time in Old Age From a Christian Point-of-View**

Our human existence is subordinated to time, in contrast to godly existence.

In our Christian thinking, we assume that the triune God was before time and will exist for all eternity. In the Bible, which is for us Christians the revealed word of God, the telling of the origin of time in the creation sequence also tells of the end of time. (Then God commanded, "Let lights appear in the sky to separate day from night and to show the time when days, years and seasons begin; ... evening passed and morning came – that was the fourth day." Genesis 1:14-19)

In between, there is in chronological order: the era of innocence (Adam and Eve), the era of conscience (fall of mankind until the flood), the era of the arch-fathers, then the turning point in history through the birth of Jesus, the new covenant, the time of grace (era of the church) until the point of Christ's return to the earth in

glory.

So much to time proportion in the Bible.

Old age / seniority.

What does old age mean from a Christian point-of-view?

From a biblical point-of-view, old age is a merciful gift as thanks for a god-fearing life. "Long life is the reward of the righteous; grey hair is a glorious crown" (Proverbs 16, verse 31) or "the fear of the Lord prolongs days, ..." (Proverbs 10, verse 27). God promises the elderly to carry them through: "I am your God and I carry you, until you are old and your hair is grey" (Isaiah 46, verse 4). He promises vital strength: "the righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, ... they shall still bear fruit in old age, they shall be fresh and flourishing, to declare that the Lord is upright..." (Psalm 92, verse 12-15).

How do elderly believers see their presence and their future? In my dissertation, I could show that the practice of faith reaches its peak in old age.<sup>5</sup> The inner execution of the faith – prayer, acceptance of forgiveness, acceptance or appropriation of God's word for/to the personal situation – or as well the process of acquiring features released by role models could be worked out as an active part of the relationship to God. In contrast, there was in an inner interaction the feeling of being carried through by God's acceptance and love. The more active the practice of faith is, the stronger the feelings are of being carried and secured through the relationship to God (father, son and holy spirit). Thereby, faith in the Bible's validity played a decisive role. My interviewees accepted their old age.

From a biblical point-of-view, the future starts the moment a person accepts and experiences personally for himself the faith in Jesus Christ's act of salvation. In that moment – today – the individual is taken into Jesus' act of salvation; the

promised blessings for the future have started for him already. The believer receives a share in the strength of God or better, in Jesus' power of resurrection. Jesus as the resurrected is the guarantor for the believer's future. ("Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:17).

How did my interviewees express their conceptions of the future?

Two examples:

A Lady talks of life after death as "eternity". Her understanding of eternity is a place where she is at home and which is her own: "Eternity means homeland to me". She is strongly attracted to this eternal home. "It pulls me there with all its might. I long to be there where I don't have to leave any more." (Lamprecht S. 246). Or another gentleman has in regard to the future an inner certainty that he will meet the person of Jesus: "quickly answered: He comes up to us. Jesus. This is my certainty for the future". And shortly afterwards: "if this omnipresent Lord (whom is given all power in heaven and earth) comes up to me, then I don't have to fear times or events that will come... I take Jesus' promise seriously and trust in it (S. 284)."

In this respect, the Christian-orientated elderly person is in his experience of time a special case.

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<sup>1</sup> Draaisma, D. : "Why life passes by faster when we grow old." Piper 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Kruse, A.: "Potentials of age", 1990, Magazine of Gerontology, 23, pg. 235-245.

<sup>3</sup> Kruse, A.: „Time, Biographies and curriculum vitae“, Magazine of Gerontology, 33, Supplement 1, Feb. 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Bergson, H. (1994) Time and Freedom, Europäische Verlag Anstalt, Hamburg.

<sup>5</sup> Lamprecht, A.M. „Christian Faith in Old Age“ LitVerlag, 2006.