

What is an Elderquest and Why is it so Important

The Longevity Revolution and *The Emergence of the New Cinema and Literature of Age*

The impact of the longevity revolution is already prodigious. In 2002, the latest year for which we have reliable numbers, 35.6 million—one out of eight Americans or 12.3% of the population—were 65 or older, up 10.2 % from 1992 and more than triple the number in 1900. By 2030, when the boomers will all be 65, the number of older Americans will reach 71.5 million—a full one fifth of the population,¹

And it's the older segments of this age group that are growing the fastest. In 2002, the 65-74 age group (18.3 million) was eight times larger than in 1900, but the 75-84 group (12.7 million) was more than 16 times larger, and the 85+ group (4.6 million) was almost 38 times larger.

Life expectancies have also increased dramatically. In 2001, persons reaching age 65 had an average life expectancy of an additional 18.1 years (19.4 years for females and 16.4 years for males).

With so many living so much longer, more than 30 years longer than in 1900, it is not surprising that a number of disciplines have begun to reexamine not only old age but all of life's stages—their duration, their purposes or “developmental tasks,” and their relative importance. In gerontology and psychology, Peter Laslett's promulgation of *The Third Age*, a new life stage between middle age and old age; Robert Butler's work on the life review;; Jungian Allan Chinen's work on fairy tales and the second half of life, and Erik Erikson's pioneering work in developmental psychology all spring quickly to mind.²

Less attention has been paid, but the arts and the humanities are also responding to this gift of years and its impact on how we live and understand our lives.³ For today's film makers and novelists, longer life spans and more and more people to experience them mean that narratives can be expected to continue, like today's lives, long past 65, and that the heroes of such extended stories can be expected to embark on adventures, make choices, and forge new connections well into their seventies and eighties. Then, because of these late-life actions and choices, they can also be expected to alter their attitudes to some of their earlier, youthful or mid-life actions and choices, thus changing the ways in which they perceive the meaning and value of their whole lives.

¹ **A Profile of Older Americans, 2002.** Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (www.aoa.gov/prof/Statistics/profile/profiles2002)

² See Laslett, Peter. **A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age.** Cambridge: Harvard, 1991; Butler, Robert. *Butler Reviews Life Review.* **Aging Today.** November-December 2003 Vol. 24 #6; Chinen, Allen B. **In the Ever After: Fairy Tales and the Second Half of Life.** Willmette, Ill: Chiron Publications, 1989.; Erikson, Erik, Joan Erikson, and Helen Kivnick. **Vital Involvement in Old Age.** New York: Norton and Norton, 1989. 239-292.; and . “Wild Strawberries” in **Adulthood** ed. Erik H. Erikson New York: W.W. Norton, 1978 and Erikson, Erik. Joan Erikson.

³ It's worth noting that Erikson turned to Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (the first film in our program) to define the developmental tasks characteristic of old age.

By taking their characters on late-life journeys or *elderquests*⁴ such as these, Ingmar Bergman and Philip Roth, Alexander Payne and Ethan Canan, Paul Masursky and Louis Begley, David Lynch, Paule Marshall, and an increasing number of directors and novelists have created a new *Cinema and Literature of Age*. They have also replaced F. Scott Fitzgerald's now outdated insistence that "there are no second acts in American lives," with the more contemporary and appropriate insistence that there are not only two, but oftentimes three, and that they might even increase rather than decrease in drama and importance.⁵

These new narratives of the new old age perform a dual function—they offer alternatives to the now outdated narratives that equate aging with decline and 65 with the end of development, and they provide new models for what is essentially a whole new life stage—the close to twenty years of healthy, active living that many of us can now look forward to after 65.

But in spite of their increasing numbers, these new aging narratives have yet to receive the exposure and the serious critical attention they will need if they are to alter the ways in which the culture defines and experiences its new, longer, and potentially more important old age. That is the chief reason we are asking the NEH to help us bring **The Elderquest in Today's Movies and Novels** to a nationwide audience of influential elders and their friends.

Defining *The Elderquest*

Even *The Elderquest*, the most frequent and compelling of these new aging narratives, has never been identified, labeled, or studied as a serious and insightful approach to the nature and meaning of the new old age. And yet there are at least 40 examples, more appear each year, and all tell roughly the same story.

An older woman or man sets out on a hazardous journey, often uncertain of why and apparently ill prepared. There is, however, an urgent if mysterious call to depart—a dream of one's own death, an unsettling personal encounter, a change of residence, a death or an illness in the family. Progress is fitful, unpredictable, and slow; and the vehicle of choice tends to be homely and ill suited—a bus that breaks down or goes to the wrong places, an antique Packard touring car, a used riding mower, a stolen jeep. Some of these elder questers even hitchhike or pick up other hitchhikers along the way. There's invariably a guide, and often there are several—a daughter-in-law, a teen age runaway, a twelve year old boy, friends and relatives from the past, even a local sheriff. Frequently there's a sense of amusement or astonishment that these elder questers have had the courage (or lack of sense) to set out at all, but a sense of urgency nearly always accompanies them even when their lack of progress seems pitiable or funny. But the farther they go; the more unpredictable their adventures become; the more one believes in the rightness of their decisions and the benefits which they seem to derive from them.

They're not running away from anything (as are the young heroes—or antiheroes—of the road movies they seem to be imitating), nor are they in conflict with anyone or anything outside themselves (as are the heroes who set off to do battle against the world in life's earlier quests).

⁴ The term is ours.

⁵ They have also confirmed T.S. Eliot's insistence (in the *Four Quartets*) that "old men ought to be explorers." For some sense of how rapidly this new *Cinema and Literature of Age* has grown (and how many of our great film makers and novelists are participating) turn to Appendix A where we have included our own film and book lists as well as other filmographies, bibliographies, and critical studies.

They are instead open-hearted and intensely vulnerable, intent only on completing themselves—by going home, by revisiting the past (but only to salvage what they need and to let go of the rest), by visiting old haunts and old loves or making new, equally important connections. They listen to those who are also open-hearted and sympathetic, but they refuse to listen to anyone, family included, who tells them what they should do and how they should feel.

Finally, and most astonishingly, nearly all these elder questers successfully complete their improbable and eventually transformative journeys and reap their rewards—a new sense of integrity, a greater capacity for love, and eventually the courage to let it all go and help the young to prepare for the ascendancy of the next generation.

The *Elderquest* is (among other things) a new kind of road movie, and it has already provided us with some of the most moving and memorable scenes in the history of film—Alvin Straight (in **The Straight Story**) putting along at three miles an hour on his riding mower, off on an heroic journey of reconciliation, yet ant-like in size and pace midst the endless Iowa corn; the aging couple in **Children of Nature** taking off for Iceland’s wild western coast in a stolen jeep and avoiding capture by disappearing into the landscape; Professor Borg confronting his own faceless corpse in the dream that sets him off on his life altering journey in **Wild Strawberries**; Ms Watts grinning with satisfaction as she finally eludes her children and settles into her window seat on the bus that will take her on her **Trip to Bountiful**, and, most dramatically perhaps, Dona Dora risking everything to save 12 year old Josue’s life and fleeing Rio to accompany him on a desperate search for his lost father—and hers—in Brazil’s **Central Station**.

In fiction the storylines and images are no less startling and vivid. No longer able to stomach the lie that her life has become, 70something, Avey (short for Avatar) Johnson jumps ship (the *Bianca Pride*) in mid-cruise to explore her Afro-Caribbean roots. (**Praisesong for the Widow**); August Kleinman, that “distinguished little man,” and a 78 year old retired Jewish brewer and grandfather, flies to Japan to make peace with the descendants of the Japanese officer he has executed in the tunnels of Aguni Jima in World War II (**Carry Me Across the Water**).

Why are all these new aging narratives so powerful, so positive—and so similar?

1. The Elderquest has a long, though little noticed history, starting with Homer and Sophocles

The *Elderquest* first appears, quite surprisingly, in the midst of Homer’s **Odyssey**, the prototype for the heroic quest associated with mid-life, and it receives its first extended treatment in Sophocles’ often neglected masterpiece, **Oedipus at Colonos**. It has also resurfaced periodically, most notably in Shakespeare’s **King Lear** and **The Tempest** and in Cervantes’ **Don Quixote**.

But these earlier *elderquests* speak of the kind of old age that for more than two millennia few had the opportunity to experience (when Sophocles wrote **Oedipus at Colonos**, he was 89, but the average life expectancy was less than forty), and they have therefore been overshadowed by stories such as the main narrative of **The Odyssey** and **Oedipus the King** that speak of life’s earlier, transformative quests.

Homer's *Elderquest*, a 22 line passage in Book V⁶ and the only one of Tiresias' prophecies that is not realized before the epic ends, was to have taken place long after Odysseus completed his first quest and returned to Ithaca. Setting out alone and on foot, carrying his oar, the aging hero was to keep going until the farmers mistake his oar for a winnowing fork. Then he was to plant his oar, make sacrifices to the Gods, and return home where eventually a decidedly un-heroic death would come to him with his "people in blessed peace all around."

Odysseus displayed little interest in this anticlimactic and un-heroic, late-life quest, and for more than two millennia nearly everyone seems to have shared his disdain. Commentators on **The Odyssey** have either downplayed its significance or ignored it altogether.⁷ Nor has anyone, until quite recently, tried to explain what this final journey might actually accomplish for the aging hero willing to undertake it.

The only person to do so is Helen Luke, the Jungian author of **Old Age: Journey into Simplicity**. In fact, she takes Tiresias' prophecy so seriously that she not only interprets it but completes it for us⁸. In the process, she reminds us that the winnowing rake is the tool that farmers use to separate the wheat from the chaff, and that this is a process that mirrors in the psychic realm the acquisition of wisdom and mature judgment, the ability to discern between that which really matters and that which doesn't. According to this interpretation, Odysseus isn't simply being asked to retire and renounce his power and prowess, he is being asked to exchange it for that which he has learned along the way, the wisdom to weigh alternatives and discard the less desirable ones.

In short, this last journey really is an *elderquest* because its successful completion requires the mastery of a whole new set of skills (today's developmental psychologists would call them "developmental tasks"), those that are necessary to navigate not midlife but old age—, trust, wisdom, and the willingness to let go.

⁶ For the full text see Appendix ?, Handout 5: **Odysseus, Oedipus, and the Elderquest**

⁷ With one notable exception, Thomas A. Falkner in his **The Poetics of Old Age in Greek Epic, Lyric, and Tragedy**. (Norman: Univ. of Okla. Press, 1995). Falkner notes that the *Elderquest* is but one of several passages that speak of Homer's own advancing age. He also provides us with an excellent reading of **Oedipus at Colonus** as an *Elderquest* (though he does not use the term), concluding that both these *elderquests* were clearly alternative and not generally accepted narratives of old age. In fact, the chorus in **Oedipus at Colonus**, in what has become the most famous of Sophocles' choral odes, is clearly the spokesman for what was classical Greece's dominant narrative of decline:

For once his youth slips by, light on the wing
lightheaded...what mortal blows can he escape
what griefs won't stalk his days?
Envy and enemies, rage and battles, bloodshed
and last of all despised old age overtakes him,
stripped of power, companions, stripped of love—
the worst this life of pain can offer,
old age our mate at last. (lls 1392-99, Fagles translation)

⁸ See "*The Planting of the Oar 10-24 in Old Age: Journey into Simplicity*. New York:Parabola Books, 1987. Luke's title also comes from T.S. Eliot's **Four Quartets**:

Quick now, here now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
Little Gidding

Sophocles created the first successfully completed elderquest when, in his late eighties, he returned to the story of Oedipus in **Oedipus at Colonus**. It ends with an Oedipus wiser, more loving, clearer about the meaning of his life, and therefore more powerful than the Oedipus at the conclusion of the earlier **Oedipus the King**. Yet, as we all know, it's the younger Oedipus—only half way through his extraordinary and emblematic life—who continues to capture the western imagination. Nonetheless, his eventual transformation from despair to integrity, from scapegoat and scourge of Thebes to citizen and blessed guardian spirit of Athens would not have been possible without the successful completion of his *Elderquest* in the later and less well known of the two plays.⁹

2. The Elderquest extends and completes life's journey as it has been defined by Joseph Campbell and others in the now widely accepted monomyth.

The *Elderquest* is clearly an effective vehicle for dramatizing both the unique challenges that confront the old, and the energy, resourcefulness, and determination with which they ride forth (quite literally) to meet and vanquish them. If this sounds like too heroic (and youthful) a story line for the *Cinema and Literature of Age*, remember that the *Elderquest* is just what its name implies, an heroic quest undertaken not in youth or mid-life but in old age.

The traditional hero's quest, the one that has been so thoroughly studied by today's depth psychologists, literary scholars, collectors of myths, and historians of religion, has been popularized by Joseph Campbell in what he calls "the monomyth"¹⁰. Here, from **The Hero with a Thousand Faces**, is "the nuclear unit" of that composite hero's journey.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men.¹¹

The *Elderquest* clearly echoes this form—its heroes are also called to depart, to do battle against significant adversaries, and then to return transformed by the experience. This lends extra credibility and stature to the protagonists, announcing to the audience that heroic journeys are not the exclusive privilege of the young, that the thousand and first face of Campbell's hero is, in short, an old and wrinkled one.

But the *Elderquest* also contradicts one of the monomyth's basic tenets—that its earlier, mid-life journey is the climactic journey of one's life, that after the hero has returned and shared its boons, he is expected to retire, rest on his laurels, and enjoy his largely uneventful and no longer adventurous old age.

But as we have seen, the *elderquest* is not only another, transformative journey, one that is just as important as the heroic, mid-life one, it is also profoundly different. Elder heroes are called to journey forth into the world, but their real journeys are inward and their real adversaries themselves. They often move backward in time, the pace at which

⁹ See Appendix ? *Oedipus The King and Oedipus at Colonus: The Hero's Quest vs. The Elderquest*, an excerpt from a work in progress by project director, Charles Nicholas

¹⁰ The term was actually coined by James Joyce in **Finnegan's Wake**.

¹¹p. 30. Campbell, Joseph. **The Hero with a Thousand Faces**. New York: Meridian Books, 1949.

they proceed is far slower, and the victories and transformations that ensue have little to do with overcoming external forces and everything to do with encountering the self, death, God, and transcendence.

3. The Elderquest foreshadows, dramatizes, and confirms the work of Erik Erikson and the developmental psychologists

For the developmental psychologists, the differences between mid-life quests and *elderquests* are crucial for they illustrate two of their most important assumptions about old age—that it is not the end of development but the advent of a new stage (or stages) and that these stage(s), like all the others, have their own developmental tasks. In other words, quests are bound to continue past middle age, and they are equally certain to be different in form and content from those that proceed them.

It isn't always easy to determine which came first—these recent psychological constructs or the films and novels that bring them to life, but it is clear that Bergman's **Wild Strawberries**, the first film to feature an *elderquest*, was made twenty years before Erik Erikson used it to illustrate his theory of the life cycle, its stages, and its developmental tasks.

As a psychologist, Erikson was impressed with Bergman's psychological insight, not because it prefigured his own, but because he was convinced that both have significant contributions to make to our understanding of adult development, especially in old age. As a teacher, he was just as impressed with the power of Bergman's art:

...artistic works of greatness have a way of presenting in a convincing form some total truths about life, which rarely characterize other reports and abstracts of a human life, making it truly a life history—within the generational process.....

To summarize, we believe that we can best begin to demonstrate more pictorially some of the dynamics of the interwoven stages of human life, as they culminate in old age, by outlining the scenes and the themes that reveal, in Bergman's drama, an old man's search for his life's transcendent meaning; and by claiming that all old people are involved in some such search, whether they—or we—know it or not.¹²

4. The Elderquest works perfectly as a parody of that favorite American film genre, the road movie—altering and deepening its meaning in the process.

But *Elderquest* films are more than elder versions of the monomyth or anticipations of the theories of today's developmental psychologists; they are also variations on that old Hollywood standby, the road movie. In fact, the evocative power of *Elderquest* films (and the fact that there are so many of them) can be directly attributed to the ways in which they recall and then work changes on this favorite and flexible film genre. In **About Schmidt** for example, Director Alexander Payne dramatizes Schmidt's cluelessness after 65 by having him hit the road on an hilarious but totally failed *Elderquest*, even though the same character in Louis Begley's novel never takes to the road at all.

¹² **Vital Involvement in Old Age.** 240.

The road movie, as most film goers know, has traditionally chronicled the bittersweet and naïve questings of the young, escaping whatever restricts them and hopping into cars (or anything else that's fast and romantic), hitting the road (preferably west), and starting over as they search for the land of heart's desire that's just over the next hill. American in origin, it traces its roots to the myth of the frontier, Huck Finn, and the desire to leave civilization (and the complications of one's own life) and light out for "the territory ahead." Since the closing of the frontier, the land of heart's desire has become the road itself, and then, with the advent of the automobile, the speed with which one travels that road

On the other hand, as most Americans and nearly all film goers love to forget, relying on the road for deliverance and redemption is a flawed vision from the start. Like the green light at the end of Gatsby's dock, it constantly recedes before us. Huck and Jim may be free on the raft, but they're drifting south to the land of slavery and Jim's inevitable recapture—the unhappy ending that Twain refused to face, preferring instead to descend into farce with Tom Sawyer's silly and melodramatic rescue.

But the counterculture and the war in Vietnam spawned a new kind of road movie, one which offers an "overt, politicized image of subversion."¹³ Rebels, either outlaws (**Bonnie and Clyde**) or questers (**Easy Rider**) turned their backs on the establishment and launched increasingly desperate quests for freedom and a new sense of identity. But, as these two films so graphically demonstrate, their trips inevitably end badly—in disillusion, despair, and a hail of bullets. In **Easy Rider**, the prototype that is most relevant to the elderquest, Peter Fonda's Captain America and his youthful buddies set out to find America and its (their) lost innocence, but by film's end they have not only failed to redeem America (and themselves), they have been forced to face—and pay for—their own involvement in its corruption.

It's this insistence—that the yellow brick road leads not to Oz but to disillusionment and despair—that has turned the modern road movie into the story of youthful rebellion and disillusion, from **Detour** with its roadhouses full of evil and betrayal to **Lost Highway**, a David Lynch film one commentator has called "the road movie from hell." The director of **Easy Rider** has even said that he made the film in an attempt to kill off the road movie. He did kill off the last remnants of its youthful optimism and naiveté, but the road movie continues to thrive. Here's how David Laderman sums up the genre's motives as well as its outcomes:

"A utopian vision of social reform drives the road movie beyond society's limits; but the inability to realize such a vision often turns the journey in an aimless, forlorn, and somewhat bitter direction (Laderman, 37).

Meanwhile, to deepen and extend the genre's contemporary relevance, a few road movies have shown us that its rebelliousness and descent into "exaggerated cynicism, irony, and nihilism," need not be restricted to young white males. Women (**Thelma and Louise**) homosexuals (**My Own Private Idaho**), even drag queens (**Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert**) have taken to the road,

There is, in short, real tension in today's road movies between the desire to escape and the deep down sense that it will all end badly, that the only satisfaction in store for these youthful questers is the speed and exhilaration of the initial escape. It's all downhill after that.

¹³ Laderman, David, **Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie**. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003, p. 35

Imagine then the confusion and cultural dissonance that is created when older characters start hitting the road, and, even more amazingly, seem less vulnerable to disillusion, cynicism, and defeat than their younger counterparts. It's hardly surprising, therefore, that David Lynch's **The Straight Story**, a prototypical elderquest/road movie, has been called "perverse." "almost an anti-road movie."

After all, road movies are supposed to be about the young not the old; their heroes may not know where they're headed, but at least they're moving quickly, staying in the fast lane, and traveling in style. These old geezers are barely moving at all, riding in buses, renting old cars, staying in the slow lane, breaking down, even walking. In **The Straight Story**, the hero actually straddles a lawn mower and rides with one wheel on the shoulder—at three miles an hour.

Besides, as we all know, the road can be a very hazardous place, even for the young. What are these old folks trying to prove? Like their friends and relatives in all these films, we're not only puzzled by their behavior, we fear for their lives. Old folks are meant to accept their fates and stay at home. After all, they're the establishment from which the youthful rebels of the road movie are trying to escape.

Are they pretending that they're still young? If so, their actions are both misguided and funny, and the elderquest is little more than a parody of the road movie. This, in fact, is the case in the silly but brilliantly titled **Over The Hill**, an Australian comedy starring Olympia Dukakis as a wimpy 60 year old widow who buys a souped up hot rod and takes off on a series of outrageous, totally unbelievable adventures in which she is first lampooned for acting young and then applauded for succeeding.

But parody is a two edged sword, and the rest of these elderquest/road movies may begin by poking fun at the unseemliness of their older characters' decisions to hit the road, but eventually they poke even more fun at youthful shallowness and move beyond the disillusion and despair that we have come to associate with the genre whose conventions these oldsters constantly defy.

In the process, these films present moviegoers, most of whom are still young, with the truly radical notion that the old not only have better survival skills; they also have a better chance of completing their quests and finding what they have been looking for. This is true of all elderquest films, but it is especially surprising and memorable in those that parody and eventually reinvent the road movie—**Harry and Tonto**, **The Trip to Bountiful**, **The Children of Nature**, **A Straight Story** and **Central Station**. There are even films that parody the elderquest/road movie—Alexander Payne's **About Schmidt** and Woody Allen's **Deconstructing Harry**, which is also a parody of **Wild Strawberries**.

Ingmar Bergman's 1957 *Wild Strawberries*: The Elderquest's modern prototype

Wild Strawberries, Ingmar Bergman's 1957 masterpiece, is already widely recognized as a milestone in the modern reappraisal of old age—by psychologists and gerontologists as well as humanities scholars and film historians. It's altogether fitting therefore that **Wild Strawberries** is both the first of film's *elderquests* and arguably its best, for it establishes, both thematically and cinematically, a prototype for the new subgenre. This does not mean that all subsequent *elderquests* (in literature as well as film) have been directly or even indirectly influenced by it.

Nor does it mean that Bergman's is the definitive *elderquest* (although cinematically it is still hard to beat), for others have varied, parodied, and extended the form, its conventions and themes, in increasingly inventive ways. It does mean, however, that Bergman was one of the first observers of the new old age, artist or non-artist, to see it as a time for life's final transformative journey—the search for wisdom, value, and integrity. Since then more and more psychologists, film makers, and old people of every description have begun to share this same vision. And, as Erik Erikson, the author of two now famous studies of the film, reminds us, there is nothing like great art to convince the rest of us that we too are involved in *elderquests* of our own.

*The Essential Components of the Elderquest*¹⁴:

The Elder Hero: Nearly all elder questers, like 76 year old Professor Borg, are in their seventies, apparently still the age at which one becomes unequivocally old. The youngest is in her sixties (**Grand Central Station**) and the oldest in his nineties (**The Buena Vista Social Club**).

The Call: They all receive a call, either literally or figuratively, that sets them off. For Borg it's a dream of his own death, for Alvin Straight (in **The Straight Story**) it's quite literally a telephone call telling him that his estranged brother has suffered a stroke some three hundred miles away.

The Search: The call ignites the search, always urgent and irresistible if sometimes difficult to define. Professor Borg, frightened by his dream, knows that he must embark on a search for why he feels so desperate, but he has no real sense of how to proceed. Harry Combs, in **Harry and Tonto**, knows that he can no longer live alone in Manhattan (his apartment house has been torn down), and he has just discovered that he can't live with his son's family either so he begins a search for where he really belongs—wherever that might be.

The Journey: All then depart on difficult but somehow unavoidable journeys, forward once again into the world, backward into the past, and always toward more meaningful encounters with others and, above all, the self. Borg chooses his antique touring car and interrupts his trip to Lund with frequent, often painful detours into his past. Others travel by greyhound, school bus, riding mower, and second hand car, and even these tend to break down (Where are the convertibles, choppers, and trans ams from the road movies of our youth?). But all these breakdowns, detours, and interruptions bring them closer to where they want to be—see especially **Central Station** and **Strangers in Good Company**.

The Guide: All questers need guides to keep them on track. But elderquesters seem to find them everywhere. Professor Borg, for example, has five: Marianne, his daughter-in-law, the two Saras (one the young cousin who has rejected him in his youth and the other the young hitchhiker, played by the same actress, who rides in the back seat; the old patient and gas station attendant, and Allman, the guide as inquisitor and judge. MS Watts in **The Trip to Bountiful** succeeds in her desperate errand because she is so open and vulnerable that she turns everyone she meets into a guide. Harry Combs also turns to everyone he meets for counsel and advice, including Chief Dan George and a runaway teenager. The presence and availability of all these guides suggests that in elderquests openness, trust, and the ability to connect, are more important than staying on track. Without it, one's *elderquest* (see **About Schmidt**) is doomed to failure.

¹⁴ I am indebted to both **The Hero with a Thousand Faces** and advisory committee member, Harry Moody's **Five Stages of the Soul** (New York: Anchor Books. 1998) for these breakdowns of the archetypal quest.

The Struggle: Elder heroes, unlike their younger counterparts, are primarily involved in struggles with themselves, seeking to find the meaning, the value and the integrity of their experience. But these internal struggles often involve them in external struggles as well. Professor Borg's extremely painful struggle to admit, to understand, and then to reverse his almost total withdrawal from human contact inevitably brings him into conflict with the loved ones, past and present, whom he has injured as a consequence. Ms Watts' desperate determination to return to her birthplace get her into all kinds of difficult situations along the way, but it also brings her into conflict with her son and open warfare with her daughter-in-law. Some of these stories and films also show us elder heroes in difficult if not heroic struggles with the world as well—riding a lawn mower 300 miles, for example, or surviving three days stranded in the wilderness. Clearly these modern elderquests are intent on demonstrating that the so called old are still capable of weathering physical as well as moral and psychological struggles

The Breakthrough: As we have already noted, most elder heroes move quite slowly and deliberately in search of themselves. It is not surprising, therefore that most of their breakthroughs, like Professor Borg's, are gradual, subtle, and even tentative rather than sudden and triumphal. After all, one rarely comes to know oneself and accept the whole of one's past in an instant. It's a cumulative process that often takes the whole of the journey to complete. In three of these stories, however, (the films **Central Station** and **The Trip to Bountiful** and the novel **Praisesong for the Widow**) breakthroughs do come as sudden revelations. The journeys that precede them are also more harrowing and desperate, suggesting that the truths they eventually reveal were harder to admit, and had to be forced upon them, after their repeated and desperate attempts to deny them. On the other hand, all these elderquests, no matter how painful and difficult, do result in breakthroughs (with the exception of **About Schmidt**), a higher success rate than one finds in life's earlier quests.

The Return: Since the successful elderquest is really about completing and accepting one's self and working out one's connections to others, rather than returning from an impossible quest to turn one's life around at the last minute (this is how Dickens' **Christmas Carol** differs from **Wild Strawberries**), the return is marked by a sense of peace and acceptance—of one's self and of others. For most, this means their questing days are over, but there is still work to be done. Professor Borg, for example, still has to win back his son's love and convince himself and others that he really has returned to life and human connection. For others (*The Children of Nature* for example) there is no return at all for the acceptance is of death itself.

The Elderquest as Archetype: Comparing its Vision of the New Old Age to Our Own

Since the *Elderquest* and its vision of old age as the last of life's transformative journeys is as old as Homer and Sophocles and has surfaced periodically down through the millennia, one is tempted to call it an archetype for old age. But even if we use Northrop Frye's simplest, most reductive definition of an archetype as "a symbol usually an image which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's [literary] experience as a whole...",¹⁵ it's obvious that this is a story, an alternative narrative if you will, that simply hasn't been told often enough or resonated sufficiently with audiences down through the ages to qualify as a recognizable element in the whole of our literary experience.

¹⁵ Taken from **The Northrop Frye** website, <http://www.northropfrye.com/aboutfrye.html>

On the other hand, its recent and unprecedented popularity—surely in response to the longevity revolution—may represent not only its re-emergence as an alternative narrative but its emergence as an archetype or vision of old age that more and more of us are recognizing as our own. Whether we call this new role for the *Elderquest* its transition to the master narrative of aging or its emergence as a new archetype for aging is less important than finding out how well it plays to our audiences. Does it ring true? Can they imagine it as a model? Can they find parallels in their own experience?

These last questions are the most provocative ones raised by ***The Elderquest in Today's Movies and Novels***; They account for the continuing enthusiasm for Professor Nicholas' local programs, and they are also the main reason that so many LLIs are eager to participate in this national version. We intend to conclude our program therefore with the administration of a questionnaire asking our audiences to assess the impact that these *elderquests* have had on their own attitudes toward and experiences of old age. Do they confirm them or contradict them? Have they altered them in any way? And finally, have they affected attitudes toward the role of the arts, including the movies, in capturing the evolving nature of the human experience?
