



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
on new images of aging in a longer-lived society on the
occasion of the opening of the exhibition
“Dialogue with Time – The Art of Aging”
in Berlin
on 31 March 2015**

“Dialogue with Time” is a wonderful title for an exhibition about the art of aging. Here at the Museum for Communication, which I like just as much as you do, Dr Kugler, demographic shifts can truly be experienced in such a concrete, personal and interesting way that the visitor is inspired to start a conversation. This will certainly be a lot of fun for visitors. Were I not rather busy at the moment, I might apply to be a Senior Guide at the exhibition myself. That isn’t possible at the moment, but please take my current presence here as a sign of my support for your endeavour. I hope that the originators, partners and sponsors of the exhibition will see it reach as large an audience in Berlin as it did in Frankfurt.

Whoever is following the debate about demographic shifts has repeatedly encountered the thesis that aging is bound up not only with risks, but also with opportunities. However, the fact that most of us today can live to a more advanced age than our parents, grandparents and great grandparents appears mostly as a problem. The issues that are generally discussed have to do with managing shortcomings: the insufficient number of doctors in rural areas, the threat of a crisis in care, or shortages in our social insurance funds.

Of course, it is true that problems can emerge in places where there are not enough young people growing up, and where the older people then feel left to fend for themselves. We cannot and do not want to dismiss these difficulties. In particular, the major ethical questions, from self-determination to dealing with critical situations such as dementia and dying, demand our attention.

At the same time, however, we should also turn more attention to the opportunities gained by having more years, and I am pleased that those of us who are gathered here are all working on this

together. Let's rethink aging in a more conscious way – in images of aging and the aged that also depict the positive potential that a longer lifespan holds. In doing so, we can succeed in creating a strong, even more self-determined longevity society.

Today I would like to talk about how that can happen and what changes are needed – not only on an individual level, but also societally and politically.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, many people equate aging with deterioration and loss, and automatically apply this notion to society as a whole. The logic of this idea is that just as the productivity of individuals declines in their later years, our society as a whole also becomes weaker when the average age of its population rises, when the number of older people increases, and when a society's proportion of younger people shrinks.

This thesis is, however, false, at least in its sweeping nature. Adhering to it is disastrous because it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the worst case, a whole country might plan for a gloomy vision of its future. We as Germans have a certain tendency towards such gloomy thinking. That is why it is so important to fundamentally question outmoded perceptions of aging.

Allow me to begin at the level of the individual. Probably most of us are familiar with the image of the Steps of Life, which Jörg Breu the Younger of Augsburg first immortalised as an engraving in 1540. In the centuries that followed, many other artists took up the same motif. In these works, the stairway begins at the lower left with the first step, a child at play, representing the first decade of life, youth, the phase of learning and of preparation for "real life". Love and marriage follow at age twenty, and by thirty one's own children have arrived – yes, ladies, that's how it was in those days – while age forty brings professional success and fifty represents the high point of life, usually depicted by an imposing man in a suit and top hat. After that, it's all downhill. The ages of sixty, seventy, eighty and ninety all just show the same single theme: increasing frailty and senility. Old age appears only as a phase of repose and leave-taking.

The image of decline that is present in the Steps of Life continues to inform our notions of aging today, even though many things have changed considerably in the meantime – both at an individual level and at a societal level. Scientific knowledge that could correct our perspective is abundantly available. This begins with life expectancy, which has risen by some thirty years in the past century in industrialised countries such as Germany. The achievements of civilisation have made this possible: economic development, better nutrition, better living conditions, personal pension provisions, a more effective health care system, more education and less physically strenuous labour.

This trend has had a twofold effect. We are not only living longer, but also remaining healthy for longer. In terms of health, a seventy year old today is – in comparison to previous generations – only sixty years old. Beyond this, the mental capacities of older people have risen considerably from generation to generation. Researchers who study aging have demonstrated that an active lifestyle can enable a person to remain not only physically fit, but also mentally fit, for longer. This means that while we cannot simply switch off biological processes, we can positively influence the course of our own lives, and we can do so to a greater degree than was long assumed.

The Steps of Life of earlier centuries have long ceased to correspond to reality. But the new reality still hasn't really arrived in our conceptual world, nor entirely in our policy framework. The fact is that for most of us, life is not an inexorable decline from age fifty onward. What follows is rather a plateau, a life phase that was very rare in earlier eras, in which a good physical and mental state facilitates personal progress or even realignment. Science tells us that we as individuals have the capacity to extend this plateau. And we as a society have or could have the ability to open up the opportunities of this life phase to as many people as possible. If we act in due time, the gradual decline in various kinds of strength as we age need not mean that a society without potentialities is created. This is crucial. This is what we need to get into our minds.

So what is to be done? The first lesson we draw must be that demographic change is not only about gaining more years and about the concerns of older people. The aging process begins at birth. We must take into account the prolonged life as a whole. And we must restructure our lifetimes. We need new patterns for long-life careers, new ways of interweaving learning, work and private time.

This can begin as early as our school days or even in pre-school. How do we prepare young people for a future in which ever more three-digit birthdays will be celebrated? If we are living significantly longer, then learning cannot end at forty or fifty, but rather must be possible until sixty, seventy and beyond. It occurs to me that I personally would make a suitable exhibit in this exhibition. In any event, it must be possible for older people to extend the phase of learning – including those who had little education in their youth. There is a great deal of untapped potential in this area. Additionally, if the population becomes smaller, then the quality of education and opportunities for development of every individual become all the more important. Then there is another factor. In the immigration-based society that we have become, we must open up opportunities for participation and upward mobility to all of the people who live in our country.

Here too, a new idea of the aging process can help us. The best-known illustrations of demographic statistics used to be onion-shaped, with the largest number in the middle. Now they are shaped more like a mushroom. The drop in the birth rate since the 1960s has thinned out the younger generations considerably. At the top, the elderly currently protrude like an umbrella. Anyone who has this image in mind will understand that if the stem of the mushroom is thin, it must also be very stable so that it can bear the weight of the umbrella. More than ever before, we face the task of ensuring that nobody gets lost in our education system. At the moment that still is not the case, unfortunately. Of course, I know that this is an extremely difficult and costly task. But when we think of the shape of this demographic chart, we know that it is worthwhile to invest effort and resources in this area. We must reflect and react to these changes through our educational system.

The lifespan that awaits us after we finish school is becoming ever longer as the half-life of the knowledge that we acquire grows ever shorter. That is why experts recommend that we adopt a new culture of learning, an approach that conveys to people early on that what matters is not reproducing the answers to test questions, but rather long-term personal development. If you imagine the mushroom from the population statistics, there is no denying the knowledge that a long-living society must also become a long-learning society. This is a matter of developing a new attitude towards learning, and it is also a matter of maintaining one's curiosity over the course of a longer life. At the same time, it is about new incentives and institutional solutions in places where the old models can no longer be sustained.

We face the task of changing our professional biographies in such a way that the individual remains productive and adaptable for a long time – and our society continues to thrive. The new interweaving of learning, work and private life should keep our country competitive and open up as many options as possible for every individual – options for a fulfilled existence. Researchers presume that this process also must begin early. By far the most important influencing factor is a varied professional life, especially for people who perform simple and repetitive tasks. Greater variety would enable workers to grow old in a healthier way and to remain productive for longer. Studies show that the more varied one's career is, the longer one's body and mind remain energetic. A change every few years – whether a change of task within the same company or changing one's profession entirely – can often help to avoid a harmful level of routine.

This gives rise to a need to update our forms of further training. Instructors need to adapt to having people of all ages in their classrooms. Our labour market must also become significantly more flexible. Work in Germany is often connected with the assumption that a person will remain within a limited professional field while developing

a career in as straight a line as possible along a clearly defined path. Whoever has learned a profession or completed professional studies is expected to find a position in the same area and to remain there, perhaps earning a promotion later. Changes of industry or career, let alone voluntary fresh starts, are more the exception than the rule for us. Demographic shifts are now creating reasons to change this approach, and probably will soon create the necessary pressure to change it. For many people, this is tied to the hope that the growing need for skilled employees will modernise the working world and create greater freedom for individuals to shape their working lives. I believe we should not wait for this change to occur, but should rather actively promote the knowledge that skills can be transferred among different professions and industries, and that this is beneficial to everyone.

The distribution of working hours over the course of life also needs to be fundamentally reconceived, as do traditional patterns of promotion. We need not stick with the notion that forty is the magic age for career advancement, following the motto that whoever hasn't made it by then might as well pack up and go home. We also need not stick with the pattern that young parents in the "rush hour" of life between thirty and forty are systematically overburdened with children and careers. A person can also advance to assume a leadership position at fifty or sixty. One of the most important messages of demographic change, however, is the fact that we gain more time in our lives. What counts is using this time well and apportioning it sensibly.

This starts with the names that we give to these phases of life. The term retirement, for example, conjures deceptive or at least very one-sided associations. According to doctors, retiring from activities is precisely the opposite of what we should be doing in our later years. They recommend, rather, that we remain active in this older stage. "Activity" is the magic word to them, whether physical or mental. Those who wish to age as healthily as possible should remain physically active, shed their routines and venture to try new things. Where do the traditional images of bedroom slippers and well-deserved rest and *gemütlichkeit* still exist? To be honest, that is how I used to imagine my own future: age 65 and then retirement. Things somehow turned out rather differently. Now I notice that this makes sense. In short, these images do not work in a society in which the age of retirement is often followed by decades of life, not by the "final years". The new reality of aging has been visible to us for a long time, but in surveys many people still show the tendency to orient their expectations of the aging process to their own grandparents' experience.

We all know that it takes time to alter mentalities, and that this is not always a linear process. The advertising industry has long presented a very different image, dubbing those over fifty "Best Ager"

and presenting them as fit, cheerful world travellers. They conquer the world as if it were one big amusement park, whether by electric bicycle or with a yoga mat. What is missing is a balanced concept of older people who are – and want to be! – not only consumers but also producers in our society. What is missing is the idea that most people have a strong need to be useful, to be active, and to make a contribution. In brief, what are missing are the countless experiences of those who pursue fulfilling activities at an advanced age. With age comes the freedom to do precisely that. Families, neighbourhoods and volunteer organisations can benefit from this freedom, and are already doing so in large numbers. Why shouldn't our companies do so too?

Whoever pursues this question must take into account very different positions and perspectives. This leads me to the much-cited roofer who said at age fifty that he could no longer continue his work for health reasons. We grant him the right to stop doing this work – he is entitled to say this. This example makes the need for transformation of our working world especially clear. How can a trained roofer continue taking part in professional life for many more years and contributing his skills without having to keep climbing up onto a roof? Perhaps he could order and sell roof tiles rather than laying them himself. Perhaps he could use his knowledge of business processes and projects in another position in the company. Or perhaps he could pass his skills on to the next generation by becoming involved in training young people. The pre-school teacher who wants to and should make a fresh start after thirty years working in a tumultuous pre-school also needs alternatives. Why not in a multigenerational house, for example? Or let us take a look at the so-called "space cowboys" who have already found their niche for remaining active in their later years: former employees of a German automotive manufacturer are brought back into the company to provide support to younger colleagues who are developing new products. The older expert's many years of experience complement the youthful spirit of innovation. We have known for a long time that this is a productive combination.

Are we as a society prepared to greet the broad spectrum of possibilities for older people with an equally broad range of options for configurations of older people's activities?

The coalition agreement of 2013 noted that older employees are an indispensable part of working life and vowed to improve the legal framework for more flexible transitions from working life to retirement.

As you know, the legislative period is far from over. I fear, however, that the discussion of this topic is proceeding far too slowly, and that the needed changes in the working world are not yet being advanced with enough determination.

This task, however, affects us all: citizens, local and regional politicians, and above all federal legislators and social partners as the

people who determine the most important age limit: the retirement age. In Germany, statutory pensions have thus far been oriented towards defining a clear ending point rather than a transition. Other countries have much more open concepts. In this regard, Germany still stands at the beginning of a debate.

Nonetheless, some concrete proposals have been put forward, such as a form of part-time work for older workers. Both sides could benefit if older workers stayed on at fifty or sixty percent of their previous weekly working hours: the employer would profit from the maturity and wise judgement of older employees, while the employee would work as many hours as he wanted to and as many hours as his health and his other projects, such as caring for grandchildren, permitted.

Flexible retirement ages need not stand in tension with our principle of the social state. Here too, old fashioned images are holding us back. The image of work as a burden is in many cases a holdover from the early phases of industrialisation, when very heavy manual labour was the norm. Wherever this is still the case – this form of work still exists today – wherever industrial or care sector workers, for example, are pushed to their physical limits, they should truly be protected and effectively relieved. On the other hand, in today's knowledge-based society with its changed working conditions, including in industrial areas, we know many jobs that older people would experience not as a burden, but rather as a desired continuation of an active, self-determined life.

That is why I would like to invite us to change our thinking and take better account of the ways many people's attitudes towards life are different than they used to be. What we need are new life-course policies. The state has a duty to take into account the full spectrum of conceivable scenarios for the last years of life. This is a matter, firstly, of protecting people from excessive demands and, secondly, of opening up opportunities for participation to those who want them.

This is a task for every policy field. I have already spoken about education and work. Health, housing, infrastructure and many others also need to be mentioned. We will only manage to cope with demographic change if we face the complexity of the task and learn to think about policy in larger time frames, not only in legislative periods. One could also say that a longer-lived society needs more patient, longer-term policy, which is exactly what I wish from the bottom of my heart for you, Minister Gröhe, and all the others responsible for these policies.

Ladies and gentlemen, in my view our society also needs something else: it needs close personal relationships between people in different age groups. Only when the young and the old encounter each other rather than secluding themselves from one another can we

hold one of the most difficult forms of dialogue: a conversation about longer lives and our nonetheless inevitably finite human existence. From my earlier work as a pastor I know how burdensome it can be to people when they experience themselves in the final years of their lives only as needy and passive. And I know how precious the moment is when they can say, "Until the end I've done what I could. I've lived my life." That is how it is when people are able to make contributions through their abilities until the end of their lives. This is an affirmation, a way of saying yes to life, even in a phase when it is difficult for some people to say yes.

That is precisely what we see in this exhibition. One of its most important messages is that self-determination in old age is an inestimable treasure. We should encourage self-determination wherever we can. At the same time, it is true that human beings do not lose their worth or dignity when they are no longer able to act autonomously or make independent decisions, but are instead dependent on others. This reminds me of a film I saw yesterday about a person who was suffering from dementia and how difficult it was to accord him his own dignity and self-determination in this situation. It was also clear how shaped we are by old images of impaired people. In this area, lawmakers have often progressed further than people's mentalities have.

A moment ago I left off with helplessness. Yes, helplessness exists. But perhaps we can better endure this helplessness if we acknowledge to ourselves that every person is especially dependent on the support of the community in two phases of life – at the very beginning and at the very end. It is easy for us to greet a newborn baby's dependence as something natural and as a natural obligation for those surrounding the baby. This kind of self understanding for the final phase of life still remains to be achieved – by individuals for themselves and for society as a whole.

And even if it is difficult for us, I greatly welcome the fact that such sensitive topics are being discussed more intensely. And I welcome the fact that here at the Museum for Communication, space has been created for such questions so that a conversation between young people and old people can be specifically encouraged. I myself have children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. For their sake and the sake of others, I would like to be an ally to all those who are working on behalf of a change of perspective and at the same time for a balancing of interests between the generations. I fear, however, that the frequently invoked concept of intergenerational justice could be misleading here, for it contains a distorted picture: the image of the struggle for justice. Today we are fortunately very far removed from this struggle. Family relationships in Germany are positive and resilient. Parents and grandparents support their children and their grandchildren.

However, we will still have to demonstrate that our society can retain its sense of solidarity if the proportions of grandparents, parents and children among the members of our society continue to change, which is something that will happen in the future. If interests have to be negotiated democratically under changed circumstances of who comprises the majority. Or if ever more older people become dependent on support from beyond their own families. That is why the image of the encounter between generations is so important to me, encounters between generations and understanding about what we can hope and expect from one another, what we should know about one another and could learn from one another, and not least what conflicts we have to carry out.

For those who are looking for ideas, there are places available where one can learn a great deal. I was recently in Arnsberg in North Rhine-Westphalia, where very targeted municipal programmes are helping people to adjust to a longer-lived society and to practise intergenerational dialogue in everyday life. This impressed me very deeply. Shared leisure time activities, neighbourhood assistance, and age-sensitive residential and urban architecture are all working in Arnsberg as well as in many other towns because policy makers, businesses and volunteers have joined together, defined goals, and worked out their conflicts, and because they use limited resources according to clear priorities. This includes, for example, the guiding principle that volunteer work requires the necessary full-time structures in order to prevent the good intentions of individual volunteers from proving futile.

The idea of the "caring community" has remained with me as a key concept from my visit to Arnsberg. It describes a shift in thinking that is taking place in ever more municipalities, and that I strongly support. This is not merely another form of modern paternalism, but rather a matter of shouldering responsibility together in a time when our ideas and models of lives and families are changing dramatically, and we need new concepts to organise our togetherness beneficially.

Whoever systematically thinks through this concept of the "caring community" all the way must also speak about equal opportunities in old age. This too starts or fails from an early age. Those who are poor – whether in education or in money – have been demonstrated to have lower life expectancy. At the moment in Germany, this gap in life expectancy compared to better-educated, wealthier parts of society can be as great as eight years. Eight years! We should not be content with this. The reasons for this discrepancy are multi-layered. The lesson, however, can in my view be summed up in a single sentence: We must do everything possible to enable all people – no matter what social circumstances they are born into – to enjoy good opportunities for a long and healthy life.

Ladies and gentlemen, when I look around here at the Museum for Communication, it becomes clear to me that I do not have to travel far to find dedicated ambassadors of change. They are sitting here before me: for example, the Senior Guides who accompany this exhibition are men and women over the age of seventy who convey to other people what they themselves have come to understand and what they are living out. I am pleased by this activity; I congratulate you and thank you. You are not only guides who offer explanations – walking, talking exhibit captions. You personally are also a form of exhibit. You are witnesses of a new age. That is why my gratitude to you goes deeper than simply thinking that what you do for other people here is lovely. I am truly delighted that you have ventured to launch this “Dialogue with Time”, as the exhibition is called.

And I am glad that in the coming months you will convey to guests of all ages something that was also especially important to me in my speech today:

The extra years are a great gift in societies in which cultural progress has become a reality.

It is up to us to receive this gift responsibly and to give form to it.

It is up to us to recognise our lifetime in a new way, re-evaluate it, and create something new from it.

Thank you very much.