

The Book Shelf I: Geroge Vaillant's Triumphs of Experience

George Vaillant (2012) *Triumphs of Experience: The Men of the Harvard Grant Study*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Reviewed by William Bergquist

Many books have been written about the different developmental stages through which men and women travel during their lifetime. Some of these books are filled with rich insights that have great relevance for professional coaches. Certainly the work of Frederick Hudson and his colleagues at the Hudson Institute qualify as insight-rich and implication-rich. I recommend Hudson's *The Adult Years* to all of my coaching colleagues. The work of Erik Erikson, Jane Loevinger, and Daniel Levinson certainly are important, as is the groundbreaking and perspective-changing work of Carol Gilligan and the writings of Stone Center authors.

There is one author, however, who offers insights that are rare and quite illuminating. This author is George Vaillant—who headed the Harvard Grant Study for many years. The remarkable thing about this study is that it involved extensive investigation of more than 200 Harvard University men over a 70 year span of time. While most other adult development studies require that participants reflect back on their life and changes that have occurred in their life, the Grant Study uniquely involves participant's perspectives on their lives right in the midst of living them. Several books have been published, based on the extensive interviewing and assessment done of these men over the years – the most notable of these publications being Vaillant's *Adaptation to Life* (focusing on the participants during their 50s). The *Triumphs of Experience* book however is special because it not only traces the lives of these Grant Study men over 70 years, it is one of the first books to portray the life of men during their “elderly” years. Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick's *Vital Involvement in Old Age* certainly offers a vivid portrait of growing old, but Vaillant can uniquely offer a perspective on old age as it relates to all of the earlier stages of life.

The Grant Study, of course, is highly biased, not only because it focuses only on men, but also because these men were all able (and qualified) to go to a premier university, such as Harvard. In many cases, they came from wealth and in most cases they led an adult life of privilege and accomplishment. They typically have not suffered from poverty, extended illness or other socio-economically based hardships. In many instances, however, these men have had to deal with alcoholism, career failure, depression, and/or life-threatening illness. Their lives were neither simple nor carefree. The remarkable thing is that there is still room for major life changes, new energy and achievements, and profound renewal during the last two to three decades of life. It is often surprising for Vaillant to discover that men who have made a mess of their lives can invent a new self and establish new relationships (or heal old relationships) during these final years of life.

So, what is the relevance for professional coaches? First, there is the obvious implication: we should do more work as coaches with men (and women) in their 70s, 80s and 90s. Development apparently does end with old age. There is a second implication, however, that may be much more profound. The insights that Vaillant offers can help us as coaches challenge the assumptions our clients make during their 40s and 50s regarding their own “stuckness.” One of the key concepts that Erik Erikson offers concerning mid-life is the choice we all have to become generative in mid-life or to fall into a state of stagnation. The ingredients of generativity include a commitment to other people, a concern for the long-term welfare of our community, and recognition that the next generation will be changing the world in which we now live (and that we have helped to create). Vaillant would now add to this recipe: a vision of hope for renewal and rebirth in our own personal future. As the title of Vaillant’s book suggests, there is triumph to be found in the experiences we accumulate during a long life of success and failure. As coaches, we can help our clients recognize ways in which to anticipate their own late-life triumphs. This, in turn, will provide hope and courage for our clients (and ourselves) as they (we) confront current life challenges and look forward to more challenges (and opportunities) in the near and distant future.