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THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER

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The Positive Aging Newsletter by Mary and Kenneth Gergen
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“THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING”
Wall Street Journal

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***** Beyond the Pressures of Planning**

There are many paths to positive aging, but our Italian colleagues have brought to light a route deserving a special welcome. We have often emphasized in this Newsletter the importance of remaining active over the lifespan. We have reported on the positive benefits to health and happiness of physical exercise, travel, gardening, community work, creative activities and so on. However, there is an interesting overtone to these reports, as they may suggest that one should at all times remain fully and productively engaged. This would include planning, scheduling, accounting for the use of one's time, and even feeling guilty for slacking off. At this point, the call to activity becomes a threat to aging positively.

The Italian report offers a promising alternative to the relentless pursuit of activity. As Romaioli and Contarello (2018) write, many of the 30 elderly individuals they interviewed offered a vision of aging that, while active, was not so driven. The vision carries echoes of the Taoist idea of wisdom in its emphasis on the harmony of everyday life. There is no clear English word for this idea. In Italian it is *disponibilita*. It comes close to the idea of being available to whatever presents itself. Rather than following a daily plan, one maintains a balanced availability - sensitive to the opportunities and needs of the moment. To illustrate:

- From a 74 year old woman, "In the situation I'm in right now, I'm happy not to have plans because I'm free to take all the opportunities that come along. Having plans makes me stressed, in any case, through trying to make it happen...my mind and emotions are free as far as everyday life is concerned."

- From a 75 year old man: "I don't make plans any more. My daughter and grandchildren make plans; I made plans in the past: some went well; others less so because not everything goes as you expect. That's life, and I think and hope I won't have to make any more plans!"

- From a 72 year old woman: "I say, 'This morning! and that suits me just fine! Tomorrow we will see.' If it's raining tomorrow I'll get out a book and read; today it's nice and I'm going to go for a walk."

In the present bustle of everyday life, with its emphasis on striving, improving, and winning, there seems enormous wisdom in this emphasis on the harmony of moving gently and sensitively with the currents of the day.

Ken and Mary Gergen

From: Romaioli, D. and Contarello, A. (2017). Redefining agency in late life: The concept of disponibility. *Aging and Society*, 1-23.

RESEARCH

* **The Blessings of Being in Nature**

Science writer Kevin Loria summarizes wide-ranging inquiry into our relations with nature and why it is important to our ways of life. As he sees it, both physical and mental health are benefitted by spending time in natural environments. Here are 4 reasons why it can be important.

1. *Walking in nature improves short term memory.*

Several studies show that nature walks have memory-promoting effects that other walks don't. In one study, University of Michigan students were given a brief memory test, then divided into two groups. One group took a walk around an arboretum, and the other took a walk down a city street. When the participants returned and did the test again, those who had walked among the trees did almost 20% percent better than they had first time. The people who had taken in city sights did not consistently improve.

A similar study on depressed individuals found that walks in nature boosted working memory much more than walks in urban environments.

2. *Being outdoors has a demonstrated de-stressing effect.*

Being outside changes the physical expression of stress in the body. One study found that students who were chosen to spend two nights in a forest had lower levels of cortisol — a hormone often used as a marker for stress — than those chosen to spend that time in a city. In another study, researchers found a decrease in both the heart rates and levels of cortisol of participants who spent time in the forest compared to those in the city. "Stressful states can be relieved by forest therapy," the researchers concluded. Among office workers, even a view of nature out a window is associated with lower stress and higher job satisfaction.

3. Spending time outside reduces inflammation.

In one study, students who spent time in the forest had lower levels of inflammation than those who spent time in the city. In another, elderly patients who had been sent on a weeklong trip into the forest showed reduced signs of inflammation. There were some indications that the woodsy jaunt had a positive effect on those patients' hypertension levels as well.

4. Outdoor experiences may help fight depression and anxiety.

Anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues may all be eased by spending time in nature — especially when that's combined with exercise. One study found that walks in the forest were associated with decreased levels of anxiety and bad moods, and another found that outdoor walks could be "useful clinically as a supplement to existing treatments" for major depressive disorder. An analysis of 10 earlier studies found that so-called "green exercise" improved both self-esteem and mood. The presence of water made the positive effects even stronger, the findings suggested.

We are not sure we will complete this edition of the Newsletter, as we are off for a walk...

From: Spending Time Outdoors by Kevin Loria
Business Insider, June, 2018.

***Merry Making and Longevity**

As people grow older they often become more cautious and careful. They are tuned in to possible dangers, take extra good care of themselves, and possibly look on to merry makers with a sense of smug superiority. Recent research suggests they may be fooling themselves. Better to make merry! In one study researchers focused on the 90+ age group – the "oldest-old" –and the fastest growing age group in America. The research was aimed at finding out what habits lead to quantity and quality of life. In this case the researchers focused on lifestyles that favor living longer. Analyzing more than 1,600 cases, the results showed that people who drank two glasses of beer or wine a day improved their odds of living longer by 18% over those who abstained. As Dr. Claudia Kawas, a neurology specialist and head of the study commented at a national meeting, "I have no explanation for it, but I do firmly believe that modest drinking improves longevity."

The positive attitude usually associated with having a couple of drinks may be part of the explanation. A recent study at Yale University focused on a group of 4,765 people with an average age of 72, who carried a gene variant linked to dementia. Not all those who have the gene develop dementia, so the question is what factors are important to slow (or hasten) its onset. One measure used by the researchers was attitudes toward aging. As the results showed, those who had positive attitudes about aging were 50% less likely to develop the disorder than those who approached aging with more pessimistic or fearful attitudes. Having a good time in life may contribute to having a long time.

From: *The Surprising Secrets to Living Longer — And Better*,
by Jeffrey Kluger & Alexandra Sifferlin, TIME Feb. 26, 2018.

***** IN THE NEWS *****

*** Stayin' Alive with Dancing**

John Grumbine loves to dance. He likes the hustle, waltz, rhumba, and the fox trot, especially. Three or four times a week, John goes to the Arthur Murray Dance Studio in Lancaster, PA. What is unusual about this story is that John celebrated his 100th birthday March 31. He began his dancing lessons in 1996, shortly after his wife had died. He was lonely and needed an activity. He tried golf and bowling, but dancing was the activity that he enjoyed the most. At one of the dance functions he met his second wife, Betsy, and was dancing with her until she died in 2013. Today his regular dance partner is Junko Wright, whose husband prefers golf to dancing.

John's dance instructor is very positive about John's dancing skills. "We are amazed at all his achievements. He has taught us that age is just a number. He inspires us to keep going and to work hard. John can dance for 40 minutes straight without stopping. I can still push him ... to learn new things. Dance keeps his brain active and keeps him healthy. And it gives him something to look forward to – a place to go to socialize with other people."

Besides working in business and helping to raise 4 children, he also managed to earn his master's degree in pastoral counseling when he was 80 years old.

From: Stayin' alive with dancing, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 7, 2018, B6.

*** Overlooked by the *Times*, but Not by Grandchildren**

Grandmothers play an increasingly important role in contemporary family life, especially as the culture has moved toward two-ca-

reer households. Many will not see their grandchildren into maturity, but they may well be remembered. As the *New York Times* reports, they may not only be recalled with fondness, but they may also serve as revered models for their grandchildren. Because March was Women's History Month. The *New York Times* put out a call to readers to honor famous women who had been forgotten, in that they had not had a *Times* obituary. Interestingly, some 2,500 submissions were sent in to the newspaper. Many came from readers who told stories of their grandmothers or great grandmothers. On March 25, The *Times* printed obituaries for 9 of these, to honor these great women, who were also beloved grandmothers.

Science and medicine were significant pursuits of three of them, and one, Dr. Anita Figueredo was a surgeon, a mother of nine children, and a humanitarian, who had a long friendship with Sister Theresa. Two were political activists, one of whom wrote a book about her experiences in the Spanish civil war; one was an artist, who wrote and illustrated little stories for the "Weekly Reader" from 1925 to 1960. One was a literary agent, who represented Eleanor Roosevelt, among others. Grandchildren do remember, often with deep fondness and appreciation.

From: Overlooked by the Times, but Not by Their Grandchildren by Nancy Wartik, *New York Times* Obituaries, Sunday, March 25, 2018.

*** A Challenging Opportunity for Volunteering**

We have often reported on the benefits of doing volunteer work after retirement. It is not simply that one remains active in body and mind, but there is great joy in contributing to the wellbeing of others and the environment. Here we call attention to one of the most challenging and rewarding of volunteer activities.

As is well-known, the U. S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, and harsh sentencing policies that far exceed the norm in other developed countries. For example in Norway the longest prison sentence allowed, under any conditions, is 21 years.

Their system is designed for rehabilitation, not retribution. Today more than 2.2 million Americans are in prison. Among our prisoners are many who have lost ties with their families and friends, due to their long separations. No one visits them or gives them a sense of hope for the future.

Prisoner Visitation and Support (PVS) is a volunteer visitation program serving federal and military prisoners throughout the United States. Their priority is to visit those prisoners who do not ordinarily receive visits from family and friends, want or need visits, are in solitary confinement, on death row, or serving long sentences. Volunteers are mature individuals, who are good listeners, and willing to visit anyone, without prejudice. They do not impose any religious or philosophical views on prisoners, but accept them as they are. To be a visitor one receives some basic training, and agrees to serve one day a month for at least two years. Most of the visitors are retired people. To learn more about becoming a volunteer, visit (www.prisonervisitation.org), the website for Prisoner Visitation and Support. This is a signal opportunity to expand your capacities and help other humans who deeply need support.

*** **BOOK REVIEW**

* **Book Review:** *The Relational Book for Parenting* by Saliha Bava & Mark Greene. New York: ThinkPlayPartners.com

Grandparents are now some of the most significant partners in the family dynamic of child care. Many of us are parenting for the second generation of young people, and many more of us are thinking about how we might best interact with our grandchildren in today's world. We have found words of wisdom in this innovative little book, right on target for communicating with our grandchildren. We are especially drawn to the relational perspective featured in the book. From this perspective, the focus shifts from the individuals making up a relationship to the process of coordination. What is most important is not the individual dancers, one might say, but their dance. Thus, for example, the authors trace the origin of a

child's anger, not to a psychological source, but to the pattern of relating in which the parent and child are engaged. Changing the pattern changes the dynamic. Communication improves and anger disappears. The book is also a visual treat, with charming cartoon figures illustrating the major ideas. A good companion for the older generations and as a gift to the younger ones. MMG

***READER RESPONSE

* Chris Robertson writes:

Dear Mary and Ken,

John is sending you his book that was just published in case you want to mention it in your *Positive Aging Newsletter*. Have a great summer!

All the best, Chris and John.

John Creveling's book, *More Than What You See: Poetry, Art, and Photography*, is filled with John's creative work. In 2009 John was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. Despite the limits of the disease, he has striven to live life as fully as he can. As an artist, he has directed his energies to creative activities, which are manifested in this book. As his wife and dear companion has written, "John reminds us to savor every moment of every day. It is not surprising that John's motto has always been *carpe diem*, a Latin phrase that encourages us to enjoy the pleasures of the moment without being overly concerned about the future." The book is rich in poetic expression, as John reveals his life's experiences and thoughts, combined with his beautiful photographs and illustrations. It is a book to be especially treasured by those enduring chronic illnesses for its upbeat message of living well despite limitations.

Available through Amazon, and other book sellers.

*****ANNOUNCEMENTS*****

***A New Open Access Journal**

* ***Innovation In Aging***. The journal publishes conceptually sound, rigorous research that describes innovative theories, research methods, interventions, evaluations and policies relevant to aging and the life course. Oxford University Press. Academic.oup.com/innovateage

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***** Information for Readers *****

We hope that you enjoy The Positive Aging Newsletter.

- Questions & Feedback

If you have any questions, or material you'd like to share with other newsletter readers, please e-mail Mary Gergen at - gv4@psu.edu

- Past issues

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