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THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER
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The Positive Aging Newsletter by Kenneth and Mary Gergen
Sponsored by the Taos Institute (www.taosinstitute.net)

“THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING”
Wall Street Journal

In memoriam: Samuel Mahaffy
Inspiring friend and creative voyager in positive aging.

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***** COMMENTARY: Colors of Autumn**

The senior years are the autumn years, or so it is commonly said. In the same way the leaves of summer slowly fall to the ground, we are invited to see elders losing capacities, shriveling and succumbing. The general invitation for the older person is thus to be content in falling away from life. While there is a certain beauty in this metaphor, research suggests that it can also be deadly! As we become content in winding down our physical activities, social life, involvement in institutions, entertainment, and so on, so is our happiness reduced and our life shortened. In effect, there is much to be admired about contentment, but if it means inactivity it can be dangerous.

In this season of the American election, we think here of a 94 year-old neighbor of ours. She seemed content with the life she had led and the prospects of a looming death. But she was a voracious reader of political news. She also subscribed to off-beat news sources so she could “see behind the veil” of more popular news reporting. Almost to the end, if the two of us wanted to have a discussion of cutting edge developments on the political scene, she was our “go-to” lady. For us this also means joining in projects without asking if they can necessarily be completed in one’s lifetime. As research suggests, it is life giving to join in the enthusiastic pursuit of various goals. Which is to say, engagement in pursuing a meaningful goal can itself contribute to your reaching this goal.

Perhaps we need a new way of thinking about equating autumn with the senior years. Rather than disengagement, let’s focus on the profusion of glorious colors that accompanies the fall. These are years in which we are free to express ourselves as never before, to explore facets of life for which there never time or circumstance. George Bernard Shaw had it right: “We don’t stop playing because we grow old. We grow old because we stop playing.”

Ken and Mary Gergen

RESEARCH

* **Diseases in Decline: Good News for Aging**

An interesting phenomenon is gripping the attention of the medical community: Major diseases, such as heart disease, dementia and colon cancer are waning, and it isn't just because the medical treatments are improving. Why this is happening is called a mystery, with many possible reasons for these changes to explore. However the mystery is solved, it is good news for people as they age.

The major killers of cancer, heart disease, and stroke remain, but they are occurring later in life. As a result, people are living longer in good health. Colon cancer rates have been declining since the early 1990's. The rate has fallen by nearly 50% since the 1980's. Stomach cancer has also been significantly reduced. One possible explanation for these changes is the decline in eating meats that have been smoked or salted. Another disease in decline is tuberculosis (once the most dominant killer). In 1900, 1 in 170 Americans lived in a TB sanitarium. Now the disease is practically extinct. Possible reasons include improvements in public health and sanitation. As well, hip fractures have declined by 15-20% over the past 30 years. One explanation is that people have become heavier. Heavier people have stronger bones. (And more padding if they fall!) Dementia has taken a drop as well, with a 20% decline per decade starting in 1977. The chances of getting dementia have been greatly reduced. One explanation is the increased education level of the adult population, along with more numerous medical interventions, such as controlling blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and exercise.

According to Dr. Steven R. Cummings, UC, San Francisco, "Perhaps all these degenerative diseases share something in common, something inside aging cells themselves. The cellular process of aging may be changing, in humans' favor."

From: A Medical Mystery: Diseases in Decline by Gina Kolata. *New York Times*. July 10, 2016, SR 7.

*** Telling Your Story: Discovering Your Selves**

A variety of practices have emerged in recent years in which elders are invited to review and share the stories of their lives. Professionals point to many gains to be made from these explorations. Story telling gives dimension to one's life, reminding one of the many activities in which one has been engaged, and giving them positive value. Storytellers can create and discover new metaphors, images memories. Contradictions can also be revealed, enhancing one's wisdom and empathy. When others listen with care, a sense of significance is also added to one's life. Often the result of sharing life stories is a reduction in depression, a greater feeling of connection with others, and improvement in one's sense of mastery. In some cases storytellers even go on to write auto-biographies. They realize that their stories may contribute to future generations. While joining in professionally organized practices may be fulfilling, there is also an invitation here for sharing and listening together.

From: Kate de Medeiros (2015) "Shadow stories" in oral interviews: Narrative care through careful listening. *Journal of Aging Studies*. (online publication)

Aging, irony, and wisdom: On the narrative psychology of later life by William L. Randall. *Theory & Psychology*, 2013, 23, 164-183.

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

*** Sex and the Single Senior**

Nursing homes across the country are increasingly exploring the potentials of sexual conduct as part of individualized care. Many had already loosened daily regimens to give residents more choice over what time to bathe or what to eat for dinner. The next step for many is to allow residents the option of having sex, and to provide support for those who do.

Daniel Reingold, the president and chief executive of

RiverSpring Health, which operates the Hebrew Home, said, “Growing old was all about loss: vision, hearing, mobility, even friends. Why should intimacy have to go, too? “We don’t lose the pleasure that comes with touch,” he said. “If intimacy leads to a sexual relationship, then let’s deal with it as grown-ups.”

The nursing home came up with a sexual expression policy in 1995 after a nurse walked in on two residents having sex. When the nurse asked Mr. Reingold what to do, he told her, “Tiptoe out and close the door behind you.” Before adopting the policy, the Hebrew Home surveyed hundreds of nursing homes in New York and elsewhere, only to find that “most of them even denied that their residents were having sexual relationships,” Mr. Reingold recalled. Today, the sexual expression policy is posted on the home’s website. Mr. Reingold said it was intended not only to encourage intimacy among those who want it, but also to protect others from unwanted advances and to set guidelines for the staff. For instance, the policy stipulates that even residents with Alzheimer’s can even give consent, under certain circumstances, for a sexual relationship.

Intimate relationships can mean more drama for the staff, which tries to keep up with who is together and who is not. The dining room can be a land mine. Sometimes, one member of a couple will get jealous when the other pays attention to someone else. Other couples become too amorous, prompting calls to “keep it in your room.”

Still, Eileen Dunnion, a registered nurse who has three couples on her floor, said she encouraged her patients to take a chance on a relationship, reminding them, “You get old, you don’t get cold.”

The Hebrew Home has stepped up efforts to help residents looking for relationships. Staff members have organized a happy hour and a senior prom, and started a dating service, called G-Date, for Grandparent Date. Currently, about 40 of the 870 residents are involved in a relationship. In the past year, a dozen people signed up for G-Date. Half of them were matched by social workers and sent on a first date at an on-site cafe. None found love, though some became friends. “We’re not giving up,” Charlotte Dell, the director of social

services, said. “We’re going to get a wedding out of this yet.”

Francine Aboyoun, 67, is waiting to be set up through G-Date. She said she remained hopeful that she would meet someone. While living at another nursing home, she met a man who would come to her room at night. Though they did not have sex, they kissed and lay together in her bed. “Wow, it felt like I was young again,” she said.

From: Consenting adults at nursing homes by Winnie Hu, *New York Times*, July 19, 2016.

* **Life Balance: 7 Tips from the Experts**

A cartoon shows an old fashioned telephone on a table. “In the old days, we just did one thing at a time, and we took our sweet time about doing it.” Today, we so often find ourselves cramming as many things as possible into our days – and evenings - so that we are more productive (or so we feel). Taking time to rest, reflect, have some fun, swing in the hammock may seem wasteful, and even something to feel a bit guilty about. This effort to do it all, all the time, often leads to a sense of agitation and emptiness, and questions arise to alternatives.

Psychologists who have studied these issues have developed some strategies for rebalancing our lives, and feeling better as a result. Here are 7 of them:

1. *Practice mindfulness.* One way to engage in this meditative practice is to develop a reflective habit of checking in on ourselves several times a day. Am I feeling good or not?
2. *Look for silver linings:* In negative situations, look for benefits. Especially effective for women, the goal is to see something reasonable, temporary or enriching about a difficult period. Lowering expectations or downgrading one’s goals are less effective strategies.
3. *Try to boost one’s positive emotions.* One way to do this is through expressing gratitude on a regular basis.
4. *Engage one’s social support.* Trying to go it alone is not the most effective way to rebalance one’s life. It may take a village to raise a

child, but it takes a few friends, family members and others to give one a boost now and then.

5. *Get moving.* Exercise is a great game changer when you need an emotional lift. Exhaustion may seem to call for a couch, but better to take a little run around the block to perk up one's body.
6. *Go outside.* Running around the block or better yet in a park brings you closer to nature. Being in touch with the earth improves mood, attention, feelings of well-being and cognitive capacities.
7. *Meaningfulness.* When we have the sense of extending ourselves beyond our own immediate concerns, of engaging with others in meaningful ways, of doing some good in the world, we often give ourselves a sense of centeredness.

From: Seeking more balance by Kirsten Weir, *Monitor on Psychology*, July-August, 2016, 42-46.

*** New Experiment in LGBT Elder Housing**

Among the alternatives for older people looking for senior living residences, one option remains quite rare. That is, housing that welcomes non-heterosexual people. Especially for single, older people, social isolation can be depressive, and homophobic prejudices are common in traditional senior residences. One fascinating alternative is Mary's House for Older Adults, Inc. in Washington, DC. The projects offers a model of friendly, affordable communal housing for the LGBT population.

A member of the National LGBT Elder Housing Movement, Mary's House creators have developed a special communal housing model. The house strives for a family-like setting, with people of different backgrounds sharing common space, as well as having their own private areas. Each resident will have a room, with a bathroom, closet and small basic kitchen. The common areas will include a computer room and library, yoga/family room, laundry, and hydrotherapy tub, with a green garden and rooftop walking path. Residents will be offered health and welfare activities, transportation, and access to broader community resources.

Given the nature of America's individualistically-oriented culture, applicants for residency to the house will receive training in communal living prior to being accepted. The course will include ways of being courteous, connecting with others, communication skills, cultural sensitivity, as well as learning the house rules about such things as cleaning up, and sharing spaces.

The first house will open in November, 2017 in Washington, DC. For more information contact Imani Woody, CEO of Mary's House for Older Adults, Inc. in Washington, DC. info@maryshousedc.org or visit www.maryshousedc.org

From: Mary's House: An LGBTQ/SGL-Friendly, Alternative Environment for Older Adults by Imani Woody. *Generations*, 2016, 40, 108-109.

*** WEBSITE REVIEW

* A new and enriching website for older men: *THE THIRD ACT PROJECT: OLD GUYS ON THE ART OF AGING*

The Third Act Project (www.thethirdactproject.com), a wide-ranging resource for older men, is now live online. The *Project's* goal is to create a community of men to share ideas that apply directly to their experience of aging. Visitors and members of the Project are exposed to essays and poetry, art and photography, and conversation in which men share the details and issues of their lives in the third act. "It's not mostly about facing aging and death," a Harvard professor wrote. "It's about *being* our age, with whatever lessons we've learned and haven't learned and mysteries we still wonder about and puzzles we'll probably never solve."

The *Project* is an outgrowth of a men's group formed more than a decade ago to gather regularly for discussions about what it was like to be growing older. For some, the principal issues were sexual; for others, physical change and a fear of limited possibilities in life were primary sources of preoccupation. All had concerns about the ultimate condition of their brains and cognitive wherewithal. "Over time, we have evolved from a discussion group to a bunch of guys who simply enjoy being together several times a year," says William N. Davis, an original member

of what he calls “Oldies But Goodies” and also co-founder with Sam Bittman of *The Third Act Project*.

For more information contact Sam Bittman, 413.329.8591, or email him at sbittman93@gmail.com

Herein lie exciting opportunities.

*****READERS RESPOND**

Ronnie Tower writes:

Dear Mary and Ken,

I am delighted to share with you news that *Miracle at Midlife: A Transatlantic Romance* will be published October 25, 2016 by She Writes Press. My memoir describes two years that began when I was 52 and allowed me to radically alter choices and events that followed. In other words, at mid-life I changed the scripts I had been consciously and unconsciously following to make space for other parts of my self to develop and flourish. Because I was trained as a clinical and research psychologist, the book is deep in introspective observations and musings.

Now, at 72, I am again altering my life. By becoming an author, I am discovering new territory, both the whole foreign industry of commercial publishing and a whole new world inside of stories that beg to be shared, hopefully inspiring others to live with courage and integrity.

I would be delighted if you would share news of my memoir with your readers. As a fan of *Positive Aging Newsletter* since it began, I have enormous respect for its high level of content and its breadth. Your readers are my dream audience.

I know that you have the book itself but additional information about me and about it are on the website below.

Thank you for any help you can lend,

Roni Beth Tower, PhD

<http://miracleatmidlife.com/>

* Jane Giddan, co-editor with Ellen Cole of *70Candles! Women Thriving in Their 8th Decade*, published by the Taos Institute, writes:

A review of *70Candles! Women Thriving in Their 8th Decade* by the Institute of Aging, a San Francisco based organization was very gratifying.

<http://blog.ioaging.org/aging/70-candles-aging-women-inspirational-stories-thriving-old-age/#more-3711>

“WOW!”

*****ANNOUNCEMENTS*****

* **Histories of Healthy Ageing** (CfP, Conference, University of Groningen, The Netherlands, (21–23 June 2017)
Although we may think the interest in healthy aging is a modern concern, when longevity increased by 40 years since 1900, we are quite wrong. The topic of how to live the “healthy life” has been important to philosophers and others back to the beginnings of recorded history. This conference focuses especially (but not exclusively) on the pre-modern period. Submissions for 20-minute papers should include a 250-word abstract and a short CV. Please send submissions by email by 01 December 2016. Subject to funding, small travel grants might be available for junior researchers. See

<http://centreformedicalhumanities.org/histories-of-healthy-ageing-cfp-conference-university-of-groningen-21-23-june-2017/>

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***Workshop with Ken and Mary Gergen – Nov. 9, 2016, Cleveland, Ohio**

**Reconstructing Aging for Health and Well-Being,
with Ken Gergen, Mary Gergen, and Peter Whitehouse
(A Taos Institute workshop) – see: www.taosinstitute.net/healthcare-conf-pre-conference

In Western culture aging is typically viewed as a period of decline. Few look forward to “being old,” and vast sums are spent on avoiding the appearance. However, the common view of aging is a cultural construction. The negative stereotype is being challenged by the steadily expanding ranks of older people. At the same time, there is little in the way of a successor image currently available, and particularly an image that can inspire new and more flourishing forms of life. The two of us have been engaged for some years in attempting to reconstruct the vision of aging as an unprecedented period of growth and enrichment. This vision of positive aging also has significant implications for the health and well-being of the aging population. After describing our efforts at reconstruction – in writing, performance, and a web-based newsletter – we discuss and integrate a wide-ranging array of relevant research. We emphasize the need to celebrate the joys of aging, along with the fruits thereby produced.

****Join us at: *Relational Practices in Health and Healthcare: Healing through Collaboration* – Nov. 10-12, 2016, Cleveland, Ohio**

For details visit: www.taosinstitute.net/healthcare-conf-overview

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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

Past issues of the newsletter, including our translated issues in Spanish, German, French, Danish, and Chinese are archived at:
www.positiveaging.net

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