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**THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER**

**January/February/March, 2017**

Issue 100

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The Positive Aging Newsletter by Kenneth and Mary Gergen  
Sponsored by the Taos Institute ([www.taosinstitute.net](http://www.taosinstitute.net))

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

*In This 100<sup>th</sup> Issue:*

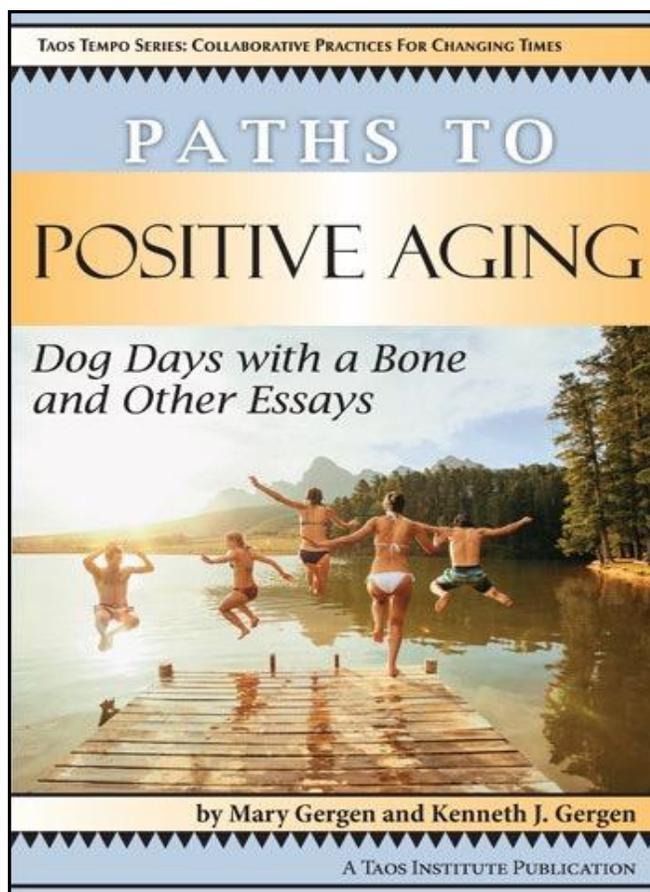
- **JUST OUT: Paths to Positive Aging**
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\*\*\* **JUST OUT** \*\*\*

We are delighted to announce the publication of our new book:

**PATHS TO POSITIVE AGING**  
Dog Days with a Bone and Other Essays

This little book contains our favorite essays from the past 100 issues of the Newsletter, along with some of our family photographs to add a bit of zest.



- "This book is unique and powerful," writes Dr. Bob Cottor.

- "Offers means to grace your life with purpose and passion," says Dr. Peter Whitehouse.

Available now at:

[www.taosinstitute.net/paths-to-positive-aging-dog-days-with-a-bone-and-other-essays](http://www.taosinstitute.net/paths-to-positive-aging-dog-days-with-a-bone-and-other-essays)

### **\*\*\* COMMENTARY: Celebrating the One Hundredth Issue \*\*\***

We are delighted to announce that this is the 100th issue of the Newsletter. Our stated aim in the first issue, published 16 years ago, remains the same: “Our attempt is to recreate the concept and experience of aging. Challenging the longstanding view of aging as decline, we strive to create a vision of life in which aging becomes an unprecedented period of human enrichment.” Such a revolution in understanding requires the creativity and support of many different communities. Gerontologists and life-span researchers, along with the many practitioners who work with the elder population can make a major contribution. But so can those of us who simply find that we are over 60; this group is on the cutting edge of creating a new way of life. The Newsletter is designed to reflect the voices of all!

We have been elated to find that the enthusiasm we have felt for this project has been so widely shared. The number of subscribers has continued to expand, and many send the Newsletter on to family and friends. Our greatest joy, however, has been in the fact that professionals outside the English speaking orbit have offered to voluntarily translate the Newsletter into their language. Thus, we are most deeply indebted to those who have made the Newsletter available in the following languages:

Chinese: Liping Yang

Danish: Geert Mørk

French: Alain Robiolio

German: Anne Hoffknecht und Thomas Friedrich-Hett

Greek: Christina Koukouriki

Italian: Diego Romaioli

Portuguese: Eurídice Bergamaschi Vicente

Spanish: Mario A. Ravazzola

Taiwan/Chinese: Su-fen Liu

Current and past issues of the Newsletter, along with a portal for new subscribers, can be found at [www.positiveaging.net](http://www.positiveaging.net)

This is also to say that we deeply appreciate the contributions sent to us by readers who wish to share their work, their insights, or projects with a broader audience. As in the past, you are welcome to send suggestions to Mary at [gv4@psu.edu](mailto:gv4@psu.edu)

To reintroduce ourselves. Kenneth Gergen is a Senior Research Professor at Swarthmore College, and Mary Gergen is a Professor Emerita at Penn State University. Both serve on the Executive Board of the Taos Institute, and have a long

engagement in issues of gerontology, social research, therapeutic practice, and social constructionist theory.

So, with the continuing support of all, the adventure continues!

Ken and Mary Gergen

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### **\*\*\*RESEARCH\*\*\***

#### **\* Plans, Wishes, and Successful Aging**

We have often reported in this Newsletter research showing that active engagement in the world is a major key to happy and satisfying aging. However, we have also noticed among our acquaintances people who slowly lose interest. They become content with the way things are, and don't seem to have any special wishes, or make many plans. As research now shows, this loss of interest may also invite a loss of happiness and satisfaction.

In this research study, 649 people between the ages of 55 and 90 answered an online questionnaire about their personal plans and wishes. The study was voluntary, and those who answered tended to be of higher educational and income levels. 50% were men. The plans and wishes they reported were highly varied. However, most answers were related to desired activities, engagements and health. Over 50% mentioned special activities: Travel, hobbies, going out, physical activities, and intellectual challenges. A second category involved interpersonal relations and productive activity. Many mentioned wanting to contribute to society. Health goals came in a distant third. Only 10% of the respondents answered that they did not have any plans or wishes.

The respondents were also asked about their feelings about life. Did they feel they were having a successful and fulfilling period of life? As the results showed, the greater the number of plans and wishes, the more successful feelings one had about aging. Having many plans and wishes for the future was correlated with having a high level of satisfaction with life.

Yet, while such results suggest that it is important to stay engaged, letting wishes slowly become plans, what of those who are not so engaged? How do you start to wish, or make a plan, when you just don't feel like it? At least one answer is suggested by the results of this study. As also found, those respondents with the fewest plans and desires had the fewest social contacts. The obvious advice for the unmotivated: nourish your social connections. It's largely when you start talking with people that life becomes filled with interest, intrigue, and wonder.

From: Being active, engaged, and healthy: Older persons' plans and wishes to age successfully by Johanna M. Huijg, A. E. Q. van Delden, Frans J. G van der Ouderaa, Rudi G. J Westendorp, Joris P. J. Slaets, & Jolanda Lindenberg. *Journal of Gerontology B: Psychological Sciences & Social Sciences*, 2017, 72, 228-236.

## \* Conversation Can Reduce Pain

If conversation can stimulate interest in the world, what else can it do? Both of us have had experiences suggesting that conversation can reduce pain. Mary Gergen's mother, who had chronic leukemia, once said to her doctor, "When Mary is with me, I feel like I am getting better." In Ken's hospital stay of last year, the most pain-free times of the day were visiting hours. Research now supports these observations.

In this case researchers were interested in the role of communication in the treatment of chronic back pain. In the first phase of the study, half the patients received mild, therapeutically oriented electrical stimulation from physical therapists, and half received sham stimulation (no electricity was actually received). Those with the full treatment, with electrical stimulation, reported a 50% reduction of their pain levels. Interestingly, however, even if you only thought you were receiving stimulation, there was a 25% drop in reported pain. (The blessed placebo effect.)

In the second phase of the study, half these patients were also engaged in a therapeutic conversation about their pain. Therapists asked open-ended questions, such as when the pain began, or when it was better or worse, and they listened attentively to the answers. They expressed empathy about the patient's situation and offered words of encouragement about getting better. In the other half, a therapist barely spoke to them.

As the results showed, the conversation added an important boost in pain reduction – regardless of whether they had received the shock or not. For those who received the shock, and the conversation, pain reduction jumped from 50% to 77%. For those who mistakenly believed they had electrical stimulation, but did have the warmly talkative therapist, pain reduction was boosted from 25% to 55%. Clearly the medical treatment worked, but having warm and caring conversation gave a great boost to the outcomes. The take-away is that if loved ones have problems with pain, we can be their best medicine. And if we are suffering, we should seek that kind of company.

FROM: The Conversation Placebo, *NYTimes*, Jan. 22, 2017, SR2

### \*\*\* IN THE NEWS \*\*\*

#### \* Ten Ideal Jobs for Retirees

Most people who are retiring or planning to do so envision doing some kind of money-making work after they exit the full-time scene. Some people want to stay in the same professional arena, while others want to go further afield. One acquaintance wants to “give back” by doing something for others; another wants to give a new creative gig a try. Here Meghan Streit offers her opinion on 10 types of jobs that might fill the bill for those thinking of a new source of income when the retirement gong has rung.

1. Consulting: For those who want to continue close to the field in which they have worked, this may be the ticket. You can name your title, your hours, and your specialty. It’s important to think about what you can ideally contribute and others need.
2. Sharing Economy. Here Uber and Lyft are mentioned as possible ways to turn one’s love of driving into some cash. For others, perhaps Airbnb can help turn the guest room or a second home into income.
3. Direct Sales. One can earn money by selling things such as wine, home decor, or wellness products.
4. Tutor. For those who love teaching, tutoring and helping students with college admission processes may be attractive.
5. Dogwalker. Great if you are fond of dogs and love the exercise.
6. Financial advisor. Those whose career was in the financial industries might consider taking the CFP exam and working as an advisor. People skills and the enjoyment of making money for others are assets.
7. Garden store. Working seasonally at a local nursery or in a store could be perfect for a seasoned gardener, who might want to share the secrets of a green thumb.
8. Freelance writer/editor. Check out freelance writing sites to search for these jobs.
9. Tour guide. Especially if you love the historical aspects of your community and want to share it.
10. Transcriber. Transcription Outsourcing CEO, Ben Walker, indicates that his company hires people who have retired from legal, medical and law enforcement fields. Google the company to learn more.

From: 10 Ideal Jobs for Retirees by Meghan Streit. *Erickson Living*. December, 2016, pg. 2

## \* **Living Long, Seeing Well**

Being able to see well is one of the most important capacities of humans. Almost all of life activities, from close-up work on computers, or reading a book to driving, enjoying a pet, and playing a sport require clear vision. Yet, as we age, it is not uncommon for a foggy film to begin to encroach on our visual field. As many discover, they are developing cataracts. Once upon a time, this was an unfortunate experience, and required some pretty restrictive surgery. Today, such surgery takes place on an outpatient basis, with ease and little pain. Most cataract surgery is covered by Medicare insurance.

An important side effect of cataract surgery is that it helps people prevent falls. People who have had cataract surgery had fewer broken hips, which can be a game-changer in terms of a healthy and active life style. Of course there are other significant benefits of seeing well.

In order to benefit from this type of surgery, it is important to have regular eye examinations. *Positive Aging Newsletter* editor, Mary Gergen, had cataract surgery several years ago, and with her multifocal lenses sees like a 20 year old. It has been a blessing to be able to see so well.

From: Visions of Longevity by Erin Advedlund, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 8, 2017, E3

## \* **Celebrating a life well lived: Katherine Johnson**

A portrait of Katherine Johnson - now 97 years old - in a recent *Vanity Fair* magazine depicts a feisty looking fashionably dressed woman, staring at the camera with a satisfied, slightly cynical smile on her face. What is particularly noteworthy about Dr. Johnson is that she was a NASA scientist, despite the double discrimination of being a woman and an African American!

Last year, President Obama awarded Johnson the Presidential Medal of Freedom. A new book, *Hidden Figures*, and a popular movie describe her rise from humble beginnings. Johnson graduated from high school at age 14. At age 15, she began attending West Virginia State College. As a student, Johnson took every math course the college offered. She graduated summa cum laude in 1937, with degrees in math and French, at age 18. In 1938, Johnson became the first African American woman to desegregate the graduate school at [West Virginia University](http://www.wvu.edu) in Morgantown, West Virginia.

After some time teaching, she applied to NASA, where she became one of the “colored computers” as the non-white women doing calculations were called. Through her mathematical brilliance, she rose up the ladder at NASA, and eventually was at the top of her profession. Her work at NASA involved calculating orbital trajectories and flight times of spacecraft. She did this work largely by hand, as computers were only beginning to be of service. John Glenn asked her to double check the results of the computer calculations. He only agreed to go if Johnson approved the flight plan. She also calculated Alan Shepard’s flight path and took the Apollo 11 crew to the moon, to orbit it, land on it, and return safely to Earth in 1969. She is now retired in Virginia.

The movie, *Hidden Figures*, is a wonderful rendition of her story, and that of her “colored computer” colleagues.

From: Katherine Johnson by Charles Bolden. *Vanity Fair*, September, 2016, pg. 234.

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### \*\*\*INVITATIONS TO CONNECT\*\*\*

\* From our friend and colleague, Harry Moody, who edits the Human Values in Aging newsletter:

I find myself more and more concerned about the future-- not my personal future, but about my new granddaughter, now six months old. What will the world be like when she is my age, in 2087?

If we do not believe that climate change is a Chinese hoax, then the outlook is not so good. It is sobering to think that people my age are the ones responsible for this, yet people her age will bear the consequences. It is easy to fall into despair, but that is not an alternative. I am Chairman of the Board of Gray Is Green, the National Senior Conservation Corp, and when I give talks about global warming, I often say "Despair is a form of denial." We all need what Joanna Macy calls "active hope," and every one of us can do our part, for "each age is a dream that is dying, or one that is coming to birth."

For those interested in more about Gray Is Green, visit: <http://grayisgreen.org/>

An article of mine, "Elders and Climate Change: No Excuses" will shortly appear in the journal Public Policy and Aging Report. For a copy of it, just send me a request at [hrmoody@yahoo.com](mailto:hrmoody@yahoo.com)

\* Mary Fridley and her colleagues in NYC invite all who might wish to join a conversation on more Positive Approaches to Dementia. As they write:

In September 2016, we had the pleasure of convening a panel discussion at the international conference, *Performing the World*, which asked the question, “Can we create a new performance of dementia?” One of us, Susan Massad, is a retired physician with a lifelong interest in the social-cultural-biological dimensions of health and wellness. The other, Mary Fridley, leads a play and improv-based workshop series, “Laughing Matters,” for seniors and others in NYC and across the country.

The panel grew out of conversations we’ve been having with people – professionals and non-professionals – around the U.S. and globally who are challenging the traditional (medicalized) beliefs and assumptions about aging, memory loss and dementia. In particular, there is a growing challenge to the notion that dementia is a condition of the individual, with the individual (rather than family, community, broader society) as “object of treatment” and a condition of “loss” that has a relatively predictable and steady downhill progression. It has been gratifying to meet so many others who both recognize that people with dementia are social and creative and embrace the power of group activity to transform the social isolation and stigma associated with dementia.

On the PTW panel, we were joined by two of these colleagues, both of whom run successful arts-based dementia programs, and the wife and primary caregiver for a man with dementia. It seems clear to us that people of all ages are eager for new, more positive and humanistic ways to bring people together around dementia, so we are looking for people from all walks of life (and especially those who live and/or work in poor communities or communities of color) who would like to be part of this conversation. If you are interested, please contact us through Mary at [mfridley@eastsideinstitute.org](mailto:mfridley@eastsideinstitute.org).

We look forward to hearing from you, and to continuing to build a more healthy and developmental world!

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### **\*\*\*READERS RESPOND**

\* **Pamela Mangene** writes:

I just received my first edition of your newsletter. My writing partner and I signed up for it when we first started our blog on positive aging a couple of months ago. I was thrilled to see that you reported on some research we had also used in one of our

posts. I love the idea that thinking good, positive thoughts can actually be translated into longer life. Here's a link to our blog post.

<http://richlyaged.com/new-years-revolution-positive-aging-new-paradigm/>

Please pass it on if you think your readers would be interested.

I also want to tell you how much I appreciated your commentary on spirituality and life beyond planning. We're all at the age where things can change in an instant. Oddly enough, I had a friend call this afternoon to tell me that her husband and our dear friend had died on Monday. My mother who died this past year just one month short of her 90th birthday, used to tell me that life brings us things we can't handle by ourselves, and that's why we need God! Spirituality - in whatever form - adds perspective and helps us "go with the flow" as you so wisely suggest.

Many thanks for all the good Info in the newsletter. I'll be looking for it in the future.

Pamela

[writers@richlyaged.com](mailto:writers@richlyaged.com)

**\*Margaret Crowley** wrote to describe the nature of a senior residence called Brookdale in West Palm Beach, FL., where she lives.

Ms. Crowley, who developed and managed a senior residence facility for many years, interviewed various staff members, in order to try to find the core of the success that living in Brookdale entails. She listed the following:

1. Awareness: Each resident feels known from the beginning of their involvement with Brookdale, and this feeling continues throughout their stay.
2. Collaboration: Staff works together to give their best to the residences.
3. Heart-Centered Care: A focused compassionate presence is felt by the residents, as they interact with any member of the staff.

To characterize the feeling of living there, "Here I awake each day knowing that I am receiving care in my home from people with generous hearts, competency in their areas of responsibility, and a spirit calling forth peace and tranquility."

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**\*\*\*ANNOUNCEMENTS\*\*\***

\* May 4, 2017 - Greensboro, NC & May 5, 2017, Charlotte, NC  
8<sup>th</sup> Annual Creative Aging Symposium sponsored by the Creative Aging Network-NC. Theme: Creative Aging in an Ever-Changing World.  
[www.can-nc.org](http://www.can-nc.org)

\* July 23-27, 2017: IAGG World Congress  
The International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics meeting in San Francisco. Global Aging and Health: Bridging Science, Policy, and Practice.  
Register: [www.iagg2017.org/program/opening-ceremony-and-lecture](http://www.iagg2017.org/program/opening-ceremony-and-lecture)

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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](mailto:gv4@psu.edu)

- Past issues

Past issues of the newsletter, including our translated issues in Spanish, German, French, Portuguese, Danish, and Chinese are archived at:  
[www.positiveaging.net](http://www.positiveaging.net)

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