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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

**NEW YEAR’S GREETINGS AND THANKS TO
OUR TRANSLATORS**

This is first to wish all our readers a peaceful and fulfilling New Year. We deeply appreciate your readership and your willingness to send on the Newsletter to others. We have avoided commercializing the Newsletter, so your readership is our vitality. We also wish to express deepest appreciation to the dedicated and talented support of those who voluntarily translate the Newsletter into other languages:

- Chinese (Taiwan) Su-fen Liu
- Chinese (Mainland) Liping Yang
- Danish: Geert Mørk
- French: Alain Robiolio

German: Anne Hoffknecht and Thomas Friedrich-Hett
Greek: Christina Koukouriki
Italian: Diego Romaioli,
Portuguese: Eurídice Bergamaschi Vicente
Spanish: Mario A. Ravazzola
Readers around the world join in gratitude.

Mary and Ken

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***** Toward a Good Death *****

The recent funeral for the U.S. Senator, and one-time presidential candidate John McCain was a touching event. This was so in part because the funeral was highly personal. For example, the musical choices represented some of McCain's favorites. There were eulogies delivered by two preceding presidents especially admired by McCain. Highly visible politicians for whom McCain had little respect were not invited. As we later learned, while dying from a rapidly spreading brain cancer, McCain himself had been especially engaged in planning the funeral.

This is not insignificant. One might well question why the topic of dying is included in a newsletter on positive aging. But consider McCain's situation in his final months of life. He was being rapidly and prematurely swept toward death, and while still a high ranking and influential Senator, he could no longer participate. But instead of dwelling on the tragedy of it all, he planned an event that could be deeply nourishing to himself and his family, and that could make a statement to the public-at-large. Depression and fear could be offset by a satisfying vision.

Discussing the possibilities of a "good death" is not easy. Particularly within secular society, the topic of death is generally avoided. What good is there in talking about the end of life? Yet, major strides have been made by grassroots movements, such as Death with Dignity <https://www.deathwithdignity.org> and Compassion and Choices <https://compassionandchoices.org>. In both cases, efforts have been made to change minds, laws, and institutions so that people with terminal illnesses may be treated with more care and respect, and will have more choice about when and how their lives may end. Both movements have scored successes; both see a long road remaining. We look forward to the publication of Barbara Coombs Lee's forthcoming book, *Finish Strong: Putting Your Values & Priorities First at Life's End*. The work promises to provide a welter of information and advice to help people make decisions at a time of acute challenge.

In our view, however, the vision of a good death should not wait until one is hurtling toward the end. Rather, it should begin with more deliberation on what constitutes a good life. Could we do more each day to consider such questions as whether we are living in a meaningful way, giving expression to our values, moving toward our dreams, or contributing something to the world? The more affirmatively we can answer such questions as we move through life, the more calmly and contentedly we can approach death.

Mary and Ken Gergen

*****RESEARCH*****

*** Kudos for Exercise: Lifelong and Starting Now!**

We have often discussed the benefits of exercise in this Newsletter. Recent research suggests that your lifelong habit of exercising may pay off big-time in terms of your health, heart, and muscles. Researchers at the Human Performance Laboratory at Ball State University recruited healthy seniors averaging 75 years old for an exercise study. The participants were divided into three groups. Those in the lifelong exercise group had a history of participating in structured exercise (for example, jogging or cycling) for a total of about seven hours a week. A second group of similar individuals had not engaged in structured exercise regimens, although they might have participated in occasional leisure walking or golf. The third group consisted of young exercisers who were, on average, 25 years old and worked out with the same frequency and length of time as the lifelong exercisers. A variety of measures were administered, including those of overall health, cardiovascular health, and muscle capacity.

As Scott Trappe, a member of the research team, concluded from the results, "We saw that people who exercise regularly year after year have much better overall health than their sedentary counterparts." The findings suggest a dramatic benefit of lifelong exercise for both heart and muscle health. "Lifelong exercisers had a cardiovascular system that looked 30 years younger," says Trappe. This is noteworthy because the ability to process oxygen declines by about 10 percent per decade after age 30. People can get out of breath more easily and may have difficulty pushing themselves physically. As for muscle health, the findings were even more significant. Researchers were surprised to find the 75-year-old muscles of lifelong exercisers were about the same as the muscles of the 25-year-olds.

This scarcely means that all is lost if you haven't been a lifelong exerciser. So many of our articles emphasize the benefits of exercising, regardless of when in life one begins. Many experts recommend two hours and 30 minutes of moderate exercise a week, or one hour and 15

minutes of vigorous exercise per week. Yet 77 percent of Americans do not come close to getting that amount of exercise. Not exactly good news or surprising news. Perhaps the new craze for pickle ball will lure many off the couch.

From: Cardiovascular and skeletal muscle health with lifelong exercise by K. J. Gries, et al. *Journal of Applied Physiology*, 2018, Nov. 26. <https://doi.org/10.1152/jappphysiol.00174.2018>

* **Shedding Loneliness**

In Western society, increasing numbers of people are living alone. And while living alone does not cause loneliness, reports of loneliness are especially common among those who do live alone. As people reach old age, they often find themselves without a partner; friends also drop by the wayside; transportation becomes more difficult, and contact with others is less frequent. The conditions invite feelings of loneliness. Loneliness is not only an emotional burden, but much research associates loneliness with health problems - possibly equivalent to the effects of smoking.

As in the U.S., the U. K. has similar issues among their older population, and they have developed ways of counteracting it. A recent review done by researchers at the University of Sheffield identified a number of successful programs to counter loneliness among older people. The characteristics of the best programs are:

- adaptability to a local context, which means taking account of the interests and abilities of the local community.
- a community development approach in which older people are involved in the design and implementation of the program.
- activities that support productive engagement, rather than passive activities or activities without a specific goal.

An example of a successful program is called the “Men’s Shed” movement, which offers men a place to meet together. Men gather in “the shed” (actually a workshop setting) to do something productive. In one shed, for example, men refurbish and renovate donated tools and garden equipment, which is then sold to raise money for charities. Some sheds offer opportunities for woodworking, metalworking, electronics, and mechanical jobs. The sheds provide men with a chance to use their skills, while simultaneously increasing their activity, and developing and sustaining relationships.

Other programs provide computerized access for those who are geographically isolated or home bound. In one study, researchers at a St. Louis University arranged for older people living in long term-care facilities to be given a dog to care for and enjoy. In some cases the dog was robotic, rather than alive. Both types of dogs reduced loneliness, although the living dog was somewhat more effective. However, one could appreciate the utility of having a dog without the need of a poop bag.

Whatever the public sector and social services provide, it is clear that the most significant changes will result from grass-roots activities. For one, this means that those who are isolated must take the initiative. In preceding Newsletters we have said much about opportunities for action - for volunteering, expanding relationships, renewing skills, developing new interests, fulfilling dreams, and so on. At the same time, those of us who don’t feel the pangs of loneliness can reach out to those who might have been left behind in the rush of daily life. Phone calls, emails, letters, and personal visits – especially to family members and old friends - can make a significant difference.

From: An Insidious Global Epidemic of Loneliness is Affecting the Mental Health of Older Adults by Clare Gardiner, *Aging Today*, November-December, 2018, pg. 11.

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

*** Connecting Generations: Living Forever**

A recent *New York Times* featured an interview with Marc Freedman, the CEO of Encore.org, which is dedicated to helping midlife people and beyond use their knowledge and skills to improve the communities in which they live. He also helped create Experience Corps, a service program engaging people over 55. The interview centered on his recent book, *How to live forever: The enduring power of connecting the generations*. Here he stresses the view that the generations can create a richness of life together that neither one can have alone. As older people have lived longer and healthier lives, they have become a generation seeking a purpose. The idea that they should be segregated from younger people, put out to pasture, and only do leisurely activities, deprives them from engaging in meaningful activity. They also have resources that younger people need. For example, grandparents have long filled the need for child care for their adult children. At the same time, the older generation has wisdom, worldly experience, and specialized areas of know-how. In Cleveland, at an intergenerational school, older people in the nearby retirement home come to the school on a regular basis to help the youngest ones learn to read. Freedman reports, “Older people who mentor and support young people are three times as likely to be happy as those who fail to do so.”

As discussed in the preceding Newsletter entry, increasing numbers of people are living alone and feeling lonely. The two loneliest groups are young people and old people. Freedman asks, “Why not create more opportunities for genuine relationships between younger people and older people that are mutual and that help people have a deeper sense of connection and reinstitute the cycle of life in the context of our longer lives?” In effect, the secret

to happiness, and living on is through sharing with the next generation.

From: Equal, but Wrinkled: Fighting Age Segregation by Maya Salam, *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 2019, BU 5.

* **Dementia by Any Other Name**

Dementia by any other name is not dementia. How is this so? Because the term “dementia” carries with it judgmental baggage. It defines the individual as impaired, lacking, and otherwise undesirable. Other similar terms that are demeaning include sufferer, victim, senile, afflicted, wanderer, sundowner, an empty shell, and “not all there.” Loved ones are invited to see the “demented one” as diseased, and to focus on what is lost as opposed to capabilities and potentials. They may also come to see themselves as burdened with care-taking, with their own options for living reduced. And more broadly, the term dementia carries with a stigma, and is often the subject of derisive humor.

Recently new ways of talking are being explored. On the simplest level, instead of calling people demented, it is better to refer to them as people, living with dementia. Most promising, there are many who advocate those in a caregiving role to use the term “care partner”, as opposed to caregiver. The term caregiver suggests not only that one carries a burden, but that the receiver is the only one who benefits. One gives and the other receives. But this is to suppress our thinking about how the “giver” is also a “receiver.” As we discussed in the preceding Newsletter, the giver may also receive in terms of expanding his/her potentials, sensitivities, skills, and emotional rewards. One learns new ways of relating, and possibly new ways of loving. The term “care partner” also brings into focus the importance of the relationship, as opposed to the common focus on independent individuals. The condition of those diagnosed with dementia is not “hopeless or tragic.” Many

live quite rich and fulfilling lives, different than the norm, but not necessarily worse. As one advocate, diagnosed with dementia in 2010, said, “I am eager to see all those living with dementia and their care partners break through the barrier wall of stigma to live ... fulfilling and productive lives.”

These are only beginnings; new concepts must be explored. Here we may recall the many cases in which the search for new languages of description and explanation has born fruit. Those whose sexual preference, skin color, and visual or auditory condition, have placed them in the minority, have all made major strides in the reconstruction of the realities created by naming.

From: Words matter: evolving the ways we speak about dementia. *Ageing Today*, January-February, 2019, pg. 10.

***** BOOKS and WEBSITES *****

The Middlescence Manifesto: Igniting the Passion of Midlife

Barbara Waxman, an executive and life coach for adults midlife and older, sent us a copy of this little book, which she calls her “passion project.” Based on her work as a gerontologist and coach over the past 30 years, she has put together her views on the period of life between 45 and 65. As she notes: “People are suffering in midlife because they are unclear about their place in the world. Are they still young? No. But are they old? No.” People in this period of their lives may be at their peak and have decades left to fulfill their sense of purpose and potential. As she emphasizes, this is a time to find or create greater meaning in one’s life. Often accompanied by physical, social and economic changes, it is a time in which adults continue to develop and grow. This period has

been created by the increased longevity of people in the 21st century.

Because of our greater experience of life, and despite physical shortcomings, we are better able to find meaning in life. It is a time when we can change the narrative of life that we created for ourselves when we were much younger. If we have made mistakes, or chose a path we no longer find worthwhile, we have time to change. For some this could mean career — ending, shifting, beginning — or it may mean a marriage. For some it may mean finally moving to a new part of the world, creating a non-profit organization, or taking up a new sport. It may mean making new friends, and leaving the old. It is a time of new beginnings.

For more information visit www.barbarawaxman.com

Websites:

*** fiercewithage.com**

Check out this website to discover the nuggets of “wisdom, inspiration and spirituality” offered by various Sages over time, as compiled by Carol Orsborn. Wonderful energy sparks from this website.

***** READERS RESPOND *****

* Connie Zweig writes;

Hi Mary,

I'm an author and newly retired therapist, currently writing a book *The Reinvention of Age*. It extends my work on the Shadow (or the unconscious) into late life for Boomers.

I'm blogging excerpts of the book on Medium here:

<https://medium.com/@conniezweig>

You'll see that the last blog was about my retirement and earlier blogs include interviews with spiritual elders.

I really enjoy receiving your newsletter!
Look forward to connecting,
Connie

***** ANNOUNCEMENTS *****

*April 15-18, 2019: Annual Conference of the American Society on Aging. New Orleans, LA. Information at www.asaging.org/aia

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

- 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, Portuguese, Danish, and Chinese are archived at: www.positiveaging.net

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