



THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER

July/August, 2011

**The Positive Aging Newsletter by Kenneth and Mary Gergen,
dedicated to productive dialogue between research and practice.
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**“THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING”
Wall Street Journal**

Issue No 69

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*** COMMENTARY: Altruism: Lessons for the New Aging ***

There is great pleasure to be had in helping others. But the joys of helping turn sour when others don't want your help. Context is everything! The common stereotype is that the aging need assistance - we are too tired to stand in a bus, to carry heavy objects, to master complex situations, and so on. But do we want to be helped on such occasions? The issues are complex because receiving help may define us in certain ways. For women, it is especially complex because there is the tradition of chivalry in which help from a man is a complement. There is also the feminist view that such help sustains the traditional stereotype of strong men vs. weak women. And so it is that as we age, attempts to help us seem to cast us into the dustbin: "You are old!" Behind the smile of gratitude, we might painfully be asking, "Do I really look that old?" Sometimes it is annoying, as in the cartoon when the old lady tells the Scout, "But I didn't want to cross the street."

These issues came home for us recently when a younger couple from Asia came for a visit of several days. We are used to entertaining foreign visitors in our home, and as these scholars had a keen interest in our professional work, our altruistic intentions were high. Alas, theirs were too! As we tried to behave as gracious hosts, they carried out their cultural tradition by treating us as "revered elders." This tension was played out in many ways. After an hour's conversation, they felt we must be tired. They wakened early so that they could make breakfast for us; on their final day they announced that they wished to clean our house. We struggled to teach them that none of this was necessary; rather we wished to treat them as valued guests. We worked it out...

It seems to us that a major challenge confronting the older and fitter generations of today is teaching the young when and where help is appreciated. They need to learn more about "the new aging," and the continuing strengths that can be enjoyed into the 90s. At the same time, we must also take into account the desires of the young to be helpful. When one's grown children want to host a family get-together, for example, one must learn to graciously accept the favor. It is a gift to them to express pleasure in their care of us. Times are changing, and we must be teachers as well as learners.

Mary and Ken Gergen

*****RESEARCH*****

***High School Grades Predict Longevity**

What does high school have to do with how long one lives? As a predictor of longevity, plenty, as these researchers found. A frequent assumption in the gerontology literature is that there is a correlation between IQ scores and longevity. Smarter people, on this account, have a slight tendency to live longer. In this study, however, an analysis was made of a sample of over 10,000 Wisconsin high school graduates of 1957. They were followed until 2009, when most were 68 years old. By that time, many in the class had passed away. Was there anything in these early years, they asked, that successfully predicted who remained alive? Interestingly, one of the strongest predictors turned out to be one's rank in one's high school class. In fact, the researchers found that the high school rank was three times more powerful in predicting longevity than IQ!

Why should this be so? The researchers propose that high school rank is an indicator of other behaviors that are helpful for survival. Most important may be habits of conscientiousness. Students elected to the Honor Society in high school are usually those who do their homework, obey their teachers, and study hard to make good grades. Intelligence helps, but self-discipline helps even more. Such habits of self-discipline are also helpful in maintaining health in later life. Of course, it is also possible that the wild ones from high school eventually settle down and become responsible citizens. Those that do may well live as long as the "goody goods", who always had their homework done.

From: Adolescent IQ and Survival in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study by Robert M. Hauser & Alberto Palloni. *The Journal of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 66B, i91-i101.

*** Safer Driving with Grandparents**

At the commencement of this study, researchers expected that grandparents, due to their age, reduced perceptual skills, and other deficits, would be more likely to injure their grandchildren in a car accident than their parents would. However, this research revealed that indeed the reverse was the case. When grandparents were

driving, injuries to children were less frequent and less serious than when parents were driving. Children driven by grandparents comprised 9.5% of the sample but resulted in only 6.6% of the total injuries. Although nearly all children were reported to have been restrained, children in crashes with grandparent drivers used optimal restraint slightly less often. Despite this, children in grandparent-driven crashes were at one-half the risk of injuries as those in parent-driven crashes. The lead researcher, a grandfather, conjectured that grandparents take the role of driving their grandchildren very seriously, and are more careful about driving with them than their parents are. They are more focused on getting somewhere and tend to take their children's presence for granted.

From: Grandparents driving grandchildren: An evaluation of child safety and injuries by F.M. Henretig, D. R. Durbin, & M. J. Kallan, *Pediatrics*, 2011, August, 128, 289-295.

* Successful Aging Among Alaskan Tribal Elders

Almost all of the research on successful aging has been done with mainland Americans, often white and middle-class folks. This interesting research was done with a group of 26 Tribal "Elders" from the Bristol Bay region of Alaska. They are natives of the region, and their views of successful aging include becoming a highly regarded role model in their villages. The researcher, Jordan Lewis, was interested in learning what the indigenous perspective would be on what it takes to become a successful "elder."

Lewis interviewed 26 elders, ages 61-93, in this area. With the help of some sophisticated computer technology and his own "gut" reactions, he and his graduate student assistant came up with four central elements essential to attaining successful elderhood. The first was Emotional Well-Being. Although these elders had led hard lives and had faced many difficulties, they had not turned to drugs and alcohol for escape. Instead they maintained a sense of hope, especially for the youth in their communities, and they were highly involved in teaching them traditional ways of life. They took pride in the accomplishments they had achieved over many years.

Engagement in the community was also central to their identity as elders. When western forms of government were instituted in their area, these men, who had been chiefs of tribal groups, had been stripped of their powers. Later, Elder Councils were established

throughout the region, and they became part of the governance system. Again, they became important leaders in their communities. The third element is Spirituality. Most elders go to religious services, which offer a spiritual resource, as well as a social network. Beyond this, many elders mentioned daily connections to spiritual resources through prayer. The major religious influence in the area is the Russian Orthodox Church, to which many of these elders belong. (Russian is not so far away for these people.)

Last, physical health was rated as significant in living a good life. Moderate exercise and engaging in subsistence activities, such as fishing, helped improve the quality of life for the elders in this study. They also tended to eat traditional diets, high in vegetation and meat, and abstained from alcohol.

One is struck by the ways in which these ways of life resonate with much that has been written about successful aging in other cultures. In many studies reported previously in this newsletter, the factors that enhance prospects of longevity include emotional stability, engagement with one's community, physical activity and spiritual practices.

From: Successful aging Through the eyes of Alaska native elders: What it means to be an elder in Bristol Bay, AK by Jordan F. Lewis, *The Gerontologist*, 51, 540-549.

*** IN THE NEWS ***

* Elders Risk Their Lives for the Young

Sometimes it is said that older people are selfishly concerned with their own wellbeing; the generations to come can take care of themselves. Gerontologists generally reject this view. On the side of the gerontologists comes a dramatic piece of news from Japan. A group of 200 Japanese pensioners, trained as engineers and other related professions, have formed a group called the Skilled Veterans Corps. Their mission is to tackle the nuclear crisis at the Fukushima power station caused by the devastating tsunami of March, 2011. Three of the reactors suffered meltdowns, and the plan is to bring the plant to a cold shutdown by January 2012. Japanese authorities announce that the radiation level at the plant is double the acceptable level for human beings. Yet, the volunteers want to take on the job. They believe that because they do not have so long to live anyway,

they should accept the dangers of the radiation instead of people from younger generations. We stand in great respect of their bravery and generosity of spirit.

From: Japanese Elders Vow to Brave Nuclear Danger. *Gerontological News*, July 2011, pg. 11.

*Musical Training Insulates Against Decline

Learning to play a musical instrument as a child can prevent cognitive decline later in life, according to research from the University of Kansas Medical Center. The psychologists recruited 70 healthy adults, 60 to 83 years old, and assessed the musical training they'd had over their lives. The participants, who all had similar levels of education and academic achievement, were divided into high-level, low-level and non-musicians. When the researchers administered a battery of cognitive tests that measured visual-spatial memory, object naming and the ability to learn new information, the high-level musicians scored best, followed by the low-level musicians and then non-musicians. Those who still played instruments fared no better than those who were heavily trained as children, but then stopped years ago. This suggests that the musical training itself has a protective effect.

(*Neuropsychology*, Vol. 25, No. 3) From: *APA Psychological Science Agenda* - July 2011

* A Case of Meaningful Engagement

Dayle Friedman was the first of 75 female rabbis to be ordained in the 1970's. Her first job was as a chaplain at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center, which was home to 1,100 Jewish elders. One of the first lessons she applied there was that she should not "serve" the clientele, but engage with them. In her view, one of the worst aspects of institutional care is that those who are cared for become helpless as they comply with the rules and rituals of the establishment. They often become depressed because they no longer have any purpose in life beyond staying alive. Rabbi Friedman emphasized the concept of "mitzvah" or religious duty to remind the elders that they should engage in study, worship and service as part of their Jewish heritage. As Friedman said, "What makes life worth living if we just address

physical needs – housing, care, transportation?” Her view is that the spiritual dimension brings a sense of meaning to one’s life. She started a confirmation class, a Bas Mitzvah, for many of the women who had never been given the opportunity in their youths, as this rite had been reserved primarily for their brothers.

Another of Friedman’s contributions was creating training programs for students enrolled in a rabbinical college so that they could become more skilled in working with older people. She also has written books designed to help further this goal, as well as runs a private practice, which offers guidance and training for people who want help in matters of spirituality, meaning making, medical decision-making, and celebrating life’s transitions, including coming to terms with dying. As for end of life choices, “We should do what we can to empower the person to make choices, to ensure his or her wishes are respected through as many beautiful moments as are possible.” Clearly Gayle Friedman's engaging work gives her life meaning as well.

From: After preparing for life’s final exam: Rabbi Dayle Friedman helps elders find a sense of meaning in the end of life by Alison Biggar, *Aging Today*, July-August, 2011, pg. 1,15.

See www.growingolder.com for more about Rabbi Friedman’s work.

BOOK REVIEW and WEB RESOURCES

* *Aama’s Journey: A Pilgrimage Between Continents and Cultures*, by Broughton Coburn.

In 1992, an elderly woman from a village in the foothills of the Himalayas reached the retirement age of 84 and took a trip to America. This book covers her travels through the country, in which she meets with farmers, Native Americans, Hutterites, and visits the natural wonders of Yellowstone Park and other places. Her reactions to the country are amusing, surprising and sometimes disconcerting, yet it is also possible to identify with her emotions and sensibilities.

The author is available to give presentations that highlight this book, as well as his own vast experience living in Nepal, Tiber and India, working for the U. N. and the World Bank. Email to bcoburn@wyoming.com and see www.unusualspeaker.com

Web Resources

The Everyday Kindness Newsletter recently contained a video from You Tube on the Impact of smiling on life, health and well-being.

To check out the Newsletter, see:
newsletter@randomactsofkindness.org.

Free Newsletter: Gerontological Society of America. "Public Policy & Aging E-Newsletter" Subscribe at www.agingsociety.org

READERS RESPOND

* Ann Basting writes:

Your last issue is as thoughtful and thought-provoking as always. If you want to explore "forget memory - try imagination" more, I did a book that explores the stigma of memory loss and 10 programs that turn toward imagination called *Forget Memory*.

All the best, and thanks for your work...

Also be sure to check out the blog for my latest project:
www.penelopeproject.wordpress.com

Anne Basting, Director
UWM Center on Age & Community
Assoc. Professor Theatre, Peck School of the Arts
P.O. Box 786, Milwaukee, WI 53201

* Nancy Gordon, Director of CLH Center for Spirituality and Aging, writes:

Greetings!

As I begin my fourth year of programming at the California Lutheran Homes Center for Spirituality and Aging, I decided it was time to review some of the basics. So I've asked Donald Koepke, director emeritus, to come back and co-present a seminar about caring for the whole person. As we talked about this event, we agreed that it's easier to subscribe to a philosophy of whole person wellness than it is to actually attend to the spirit even as we care for the body and the mind.

So together we're going to examine this journey of aging, look at the ways religion and/or spirituality impact it, look at the mind, body and spirit components of the journey and provide some practices that you can take home for yourself and for those you serve. Our goal is to provide good information, inspiration for the work you do, and some practical "how-tos."

All are welcome.

October 19 at the Walnut Village Retirement Community, 901 S. Walnut St., Anaheim, CA 92802. \$75 registration fee; \$20 CE Certificate. Continental breakfast and lunch included. Contact: csadirector@frontporch.net, or 714-507-1370

* Sharon Cottor, a Taos Institute Associate, wanted to share an inspiring profile of a 97 year old doctor who works in a hospital in Tokyo:

At the age of 97 years, Shigeaki Hinohara is one of the world's longest-serving physicians and educators. Since 1941 he has been healing patients at St. Luke's International Hospital in Tokyo and teaching at St. Luke's College of Nursing. After World War II, he envisioned a world-class hospital and college springing from the ruins of Tokyo; thanks to his pioneering spirit and business savvy, the doctor turned these institutions into the nation's top medical facility and nursing school. Always willing to try new things, he has published around 150 books since his 75th birthday, including one "Living Long, Living Good" that has sold more than 1.2 million copies. Some of his words of wisdom:

- Energy comes from feeling good. We all remember how as children, when we were having fun, we often forgot to eat or sleep. I believe that we can keep that attitude as adults, too. It's best not to tire the body with too many rules.

- My inspiration is Robert Browning's poem "Abt Vogler." My father used to read it to me. It encourages us to make big art, not small scribbles. It says to try to draw a circle so huge that there is no way we can finish it while we are alive. All we see is an arch; the rest is beyond our vision but it is there in the distance.

- Pain is mysterious, and having fun is the best way to forget it.

- Hospitals must be designed and prepared for major disasters, and they must accept every patient who appears at their doors. March 20, 1995, members of the Aum Shinrikyu religious cult launched a terrorist attack in the Tokyo subway. We accepted 740

victims and in two hours figured out that it was sarin gas that had hit them. Sadly we lost one person, but we saved 739 lives.

- Science alone can't cure or help people. Science lumps us all together, but illness is individual. Each person is unique, and diseases are connected to their hearts. To know the illness and help people, we need liberal and visual arts, not just medical ones.

- It's wonderful to live long. In our later years, we should strive to contribute to society.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

November 18-22, 2011. Lifestyle/Lifespan, 64th Annual Scientific Meeting, The Gerontological Society of America.

www.geron.org/annualmeeting

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*** Information for Readers ***

Please email me, Mary Gergen gv4@psu.edu if you have any trouble opening or reading this 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 are archived at:

www.positiveaging.net

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