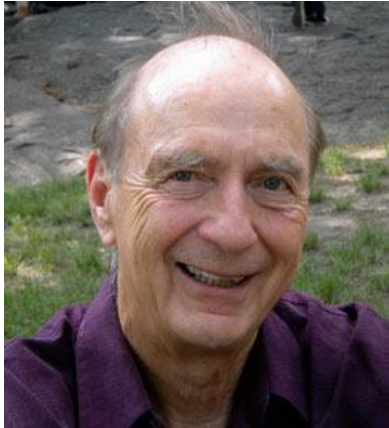


## Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

October 2016



### Traveling Dark Valleys

by Ken Gergen

For some years now, my wife Mary and I have written and edited the Positive Aging Newsletter ([www.positiveaging.net](http://www.positiveaging.net)). The newsletter is offered free of charge and delivered electronically. We devote each issue to news and opinion that subvert the common construction of aging as decline, and replace it with a view of aging as an unprecedented period of enrichment. As we reason, if we live in constructed worlds are we not better off with a focus on that which enables us as opposed to disables?

At the same time, our orientation toward positive aging is not simply about staying on the bright side of life. It also means finding ways of traveling through the dark valleys of life without falling into despair, and discovering meaning even in the shadows. For me, three weeks of this summer were essentially a journey through such a valley. A long-needed heart valve was replaced, and the surgery left me with pain, lost abilities, and many grim and tedious hours. I had never experienced serious surgery before, so I found myself without resources to move through this world in anything approximating a positive way. Slowly, however, with Mary as my guiding companion, I began to find some ways of confronting the daily challenges. I share five of these here, in hopes that others might find them useful:

*Choose your comparisons:* “How am I feeling” is a question frequently asked by others and myself. It is not an insignificant question, because how I answer can often affect my mood. The most important point is that “how I am feeling” can only be answered in comparison to some standard. Choosing the standard is crucial! If I use the standard of my pre-op life, I am plunged into a hole. I feel terrible! And, because there are many ups and downs across the days of recovery, it is important to select that moment that will allow me to draw a positive conclusion. “Compared to yesterday at this time...”, “Compare to last night when it took the nurse four tries to draw blood...” If I am careful to select the right moment of comparison, the day is that much brighter.

*Friends and family are invitations to exit myself.* When I am alone, my focus often remains on myself...conscious of each ache and pain, each sign that things may be going amiss. I live in a world of grey to black from which it is oh so difficult to imagine myself otherwise. Friends and family are powerful invitations to exit this pit. The important point is to shift the conversation as soon as possible away from myself, to their lives. As they speak about their dramas, I exit myself. I am caught up in their lives, living vicariously in worlds of significance and hope.

*Search for the soft.* One major problem with being a surgical patient, is the radical reduction in human touch. Not only did I resist others' touching, feeling fragile as a patient, and fearful that one untoward touch would undo my incisions. But as well, visitors in general were very careful and tentative in their approach. Perhaps it is the caring security that accompanies touch, but its loss is significant. Thus I began to search for any form of garment, toweling, or other soft material – a substitute, for sure, but far better than nothing. For me, the gift from the gods came in the form of a luxuriously soft, faux fur throw, a gift from my son and daughter-in-law. It was a constant companion.

*Enjoy the return to childhood.* The idea of maturity is frequently equated with autonomy. To grow up, is to learn self-sufficiency. This seems especially so for us males. Becoming a patient is thus akin to losing one's maturity. There is the silent but repeated echo, "You are such a baby..." But such thoughts were debilitating; the situation only became worsened. So, a reflection: what a wonderful opportunity to enjoy again some of the joys of immaturity! It was also gratifying to find that Mary, and the many others upon whom I have leaned, actually found meaning in this transition.

*Forgive yourself.* Before surgery I painted a picture of convalescence in which I would bask in the luxury of having time for activities too often shoved aside in the rush of daily life – reading, listening to music, catching up on correspondence, and the like. Thus, when I found myself after surgery little able to concentrate, continuously exhausted, and lacking any ambition, my initial impulse was self-criticism. I was turning into a vegetable! Then a reflection: were my hopes not just another repetition of the life-long voice on my shoulder, equating worth with productivity? The voice was now my enemy. I was later surprised to find how easy it was to enjoy a nap whenever needed.

I suspect that readers could offer many more, and possibly far better, ways of moving more resiliently through such dark periods. I often think there should be an international web-resource where people could share their many –otherwise private – ways of dealing with loss, depression, illness, and the like. Such a vision is itself uplifting.

Ken Gergen

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We invite you to join us November 10- 12, as we explore Relational Practices in Health and Healthcare: Healing through Collaboration.

We each have our own story of healing and healthcare experience, so all of us, as patients at one time or another, can share in the exploration of relational practices in healthcare.

For information see: [www.relationalhealthcare.org](http://www.relationalhealthcare.org)

Ken and Mary Gergen will also be facilitating a workshop on Nov. 9<sup>th</sup>, as part of our pre-conference offering on *Reconstructing Aging for Health and Well-Being*.