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The Positive Aging Newsletter by Mary and Kenneth Gergen
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“THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING”
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To our readers: We apologize for the late delivery of our newsletter. We have been traveling and giving talks in China, Japan and Taiwan the month of October, and so were late in editing our newsletter.

*****COMMENTARY*****

***Deep Pride: Adding Dimension to Aging**

Aging is often characterized as a process of progressive loss, not only in physical and mental functions, but in all the joys that go with them. It is dangerous to think of aging in this way. As we lose our optimism, we invite an early death. And, as often pointed out in this Newsletter, there is too little attention paid to the positive potentials of aging. At every age, we lose in certain ways and we gain in others. The elderly years are no different. It is here that we bring into focus another joy acquired in the latter years. We call it *deep pride*.

There was a time in history when guild members and artisans could devote countless hours to fashioning a piece of work from which they could derive great satisfaction. Such activities as making a lace doily, carving a Madonna, chiseling a marble vase, or making an elaborate paper cut all required sustained dedication and skill. They could take great pride in their efforts, and step away from the work, with a satisfied feeling that it was “just right.”

These times are long past, as daily work has increasingly become focused on increasing productivity and profits. There is continuous search for ways of cutting costs - in time, material, energy, and so on. Mass production, fast foods, ready-to-wear and the like, have all become part of fast-paced daily life. In the workplace “time is money,” we are told, and because quality work is a cost in time, quantity becomes more important than its quality. So long as minimum standards in quality are met, such work is “good enough.”

Now consider some of our older acquaintances, like Arthur, who, last spring, gazed with pleasure at his neatly designed rows of vegetable plants and the sprouts that in the fall delivered promised delights; and Nancy who has devoted her day to creating a gourmet dish for the evening’s dinner. Tony has retired, and has been trying to master water colors for several years. He recently entered his last painting in a local art show, and was so proud of receiving a prize for it. Virginia is knitting a sweater for her niece, and while her niece may not be aware, her choice in yarns and patterning are very satisfying; Rashad has found an old chair in his parents’ attic, and smiles to himself in the way he has brought it back to life. Each of these has created the potential for deep pride. Perhaps many of us have a special skill we have left behind or would like to develop. The end of rapid-fire work demands will then offer a space in which such activities can also yield deep pride.

▪ Ken and Mary Gergen

*****RESEARCH*****

*** Complex Jobs And Old Age Smarts**

People vary in how well their mental functions are sustained as they grow older. One popular theory is that the brain is a kind of muscle, and that the more you exercise it the longer you remain strong. More technically we might say that people build up a “cognitive reserve.” This idea is supported by a great deal of research showing that the longer one goes to school, the longer they remain “smart” as they age. Those who go to college, for example, may retain their thinking abilities longer than high school drop-outs. However, this is only a general correlation, and many other factors also have an influence.

In this study, thousands of people 45 and older were asked about their job histories over their lifetimes. The jobs were also rated on their level of complexity. The job of a teacher, a dentist, or detective, for example, would make more demands on one’s thinking and remembering than, let’s say, painting houses or driving trucks long distances. The participants were also rated on their cognitive abilities at their current age. As the results showed, the higher the complexity of the job one had longest in life, the better one functioned in later years. The research does not tell us whether one can sustain or gain further cognitive skills as one ages. However, if the idea of the brain as a muscle is sound, then continuing to challenge our thinking during the aging process is like exercising. Very promising indeed.

From: The Role of Occupation in Explaining Cognitive Functioning in Later Life: Education and Occupational Complexity in a U.S. National Sample of Black and White Men and Women by K. Fujishiro, L. MacDonald, M. Crowe, L. McClure, V. Howard, and V. Wadley, *Journal of Gerontology: Series B*, Vol.74, 2019.

*** Celebrating Compassion in Elderly Care**

Many readers of this Newsletter are caretakers for elderly parents, and search for ways to enhance the quality of life for their elders. They may thus find useful a recent book, *Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence that Caring Makes a Difference*, by Stephen Trzeciak and Anthony Mazzarell. While the book reports on the significance of compassion in medical care, there are important takeaways for others.

In particular, caring in the clinic makes a difference to patients’ recovery. Compassion goes beyond warm feelings and understanding to responsive action. When doctors can resonate with the feelings of the patients, and understand how

they view their situations, they are able to act in a more helpful and sensitive manner. Among the conditions that have responded positively to compassion are common colds, migraine headaches, chronic back pain, and diabetes. Also important, compassion is effective for reducing psychological distress, and helps to relieve anxiety, depression, and pain. A health care professional's compassionate care also helps patients to take better care of themselves. Patients are more likely to follow the doctor's advice and adhere to medicine regimes if they feel they are cared for.

Being compassionate is good for the caregiver as well as the patient. For example, many doctors describe themselves as "burned out." However, compassionate care seems to reduce burnout. Human connection seems to be protective of all concerned.

From: How doctors' compassion helps their patients by Stephen Trzeciak & Anthony Mazzareli, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 29, 2019, A10.

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

*** Cross-Generational Friendships: A Path to Enlightenment**

A young researcher Devi Lockwood was interested in studying the life of Cora Brooks, a famous woman poet and political activist from earlier times. Lockwood knew that Cora was an undergraduate at Harvard, so he began searching the archives for information about her at a Harvard University library. While sorting through 43 boxes of personal papers, he was startled to find that Cora was still alive! So he tracked her down, and an active conversation sprang to life. Over time a deep friendship developed, and they continued to meet until eventually at 77, Cora died. About her relationship with Cora, Lockwood concluded with these words:

Maybe it was easier to be friends with an older person outside of my family because families live with one another's faults. With Cora, I didn't have any baggage; we shared no memories. We were free to be friends: to be frank with each other about our hopes and fears and flaws. ...My friendship with Cora ranks among the most important I have ever had. Even now that she has been gone for nearly a year, our conversations still guide me. I would recommend that anyone in need of connection seek friends beyond the generational divide. What you find there might surprise you. We are more similar across generations than we are different: all human, to some extent, are still figuring out who we are."

From: The trick to life is to keep moving by Devi Lockwood, *New York Times*, Sunday, Sept. 8, 2019, Opinion, pg. 10.

*** Still Working and Loving It**

As the news often reports, many more people are continuing to work beyond their retirement age. For example, according to national statistics in the US, the percentage of older people working after age 65 has increased steadily since 1998, and has now reached the 20% mark. Such reports are usually accompanied by laments. The elderly must continue to work, it is said, because otherwise they would sink into poverty. The cost of living is too high, retirement funds can't keep up, and the government supports are scant. And to make matters worse, there are few good jobs available. While these laments are surely warranted in many cases, the situation is more complex. There are more positive stories to tell.

First of all, many of those who could retire without hardship, prefer to remain on the job. Often a profession is a major source of satisfaction. The work is interesting, one feels a contribution is being made, the work is respected, and/or one's job is a major source of social life. Such assets may be one of the major reasons that about half of the 9 million workers 65 and older in the U.S. work in health care, business services, retail, or education. Such jobs are often interesting, personally fulfilling, or socially active. However, in one recent study designed to study the poorest working women, it became clear that many women also took pride in their accomplishments, enjoyed the social aspects of working, and felt they were contributing to the well-being of others. As one woman said, "Work is how people are measured in this country." Work gives one self-respect, a social identity, and a place to be. "

Finally, in many sectors there are in fact many jobs available to the elderly. The fact that older people wish to continue working and are capable of doing so has been a boon to the many sectors of the labor market. In the state of Vermont, the elderly are encouraged to work, as positions lie empty in many fields. In this case, 26% of older people have jobs. So, for many of those who are working beyond retirement age, they are taking a journey into positive aging again.

From: https://apple.news/ADSHfGL3_S7273dDEWrUZ2A

*** Marijuana and You: An Option for Health?**

Marijuana may be coming to your neighborhood, or it has already arrived. In the United States, more than half the population now has the option of legally buying forms of marijuana, or its chemical components. In most of these regions, marijuana is legal for health related reasons, but in some regions cannabis is legalized for recreational use. Today the number of older Americans using some form of marijuana is increasing by 10-15% a year.

The major benefit for most people who use it for medical conditions has to do with the reduction of pain. A recent study in Colorado indicated that arthritis was the top reason that older people used marijuana; back pain came in second. Given the current crisis in opioid dependency, marijuana is a welcome alternative. A mild dose of the major ingredients of marijuana, CBD (cannabidiol), will not make you high, but it may help with pain.

At the same time, however, at present there is lack of scientific research on the continuing effects of marijuana, and a lack of agreement among the medical community as to its effects. Much of the wisdom about the drug is informal. People are experimenting on their own, trying various forms of the drug, and seeing what happens. This is not ideal, but it is the current state of affairs. Products are often untested, and labels are not reliable. While many readers may recall smoking “dope” in their youths, today’s marijuana “joints” are quite different from the mild “high” of the 60’s. The THC compound that makes one feel euphoric or “high” has increased on average from 4% to 17%, but can be increased up to 90%. THC in foods may be easy to ingest, but if too much is taken the aftereffects may be dislocating.

Forms of marijuana are increasingly available online and in retail stores. Products can vary from gummy bears, vaping tubes, oils, topical creams, breath mints, and more. Vaping tubes are now considered dangerous. For those who are dealing with varieties of pain, one should ask a doctor about a prescription for medical marijuana. Checking out with friends and family members may also be useful. Clearly we are on the forefront of a medical development that may prove enormously helpful for this generation of older people.

From: Marijuana and your Health by Sari Harrar, *AARP Bulletin*, September, 2019, 10-20.

*** Patti Smith: Keeping the Fires Burning**

For those with a sentimental attachment to the 60’s and 70’s, Patti Smith’s name may stir rich memories. Patti’s music, writings and art touched the lives of many. Her singing was packed with power, and her artistic talents a wonderful surprise. Her early book, *Just Kids*, gave an intimate picture of the lives of struggling artists in New York City. Now Patti, who is among the few who survived, and, along with Bob Dylan, is entertaining again. While recently in Paris for a performance, Patti was interviewed by famed journalist Maureen Dowd. At 72, Patti is still a queen of commentary, willing to insult her French audiences, talk politics with barbed wit, and address issues such as the climate crisis. In her book *Year of the Monkey*, she describes life as she approached 70, in which she deliberates on life, love, music, art, and death. Jimmy Irvine, producer of her biggest hit, “Because the Night”

- a collaboration with Bruce Springsteen - said of her, “Patti is a magical, magical ... woman.” Her fire still burns at 72.

From: A Banquet of Music and Words has Fed an Epic Life, But to her ‘It’s All Poetry’ by Maureen Dowd. *The New York Times*, Thursday Styles, September 19, 2019, 01, D6.

WEBSITES OF INTEREST

- Carol Travis updates her overview of 30 years ago with an essay worth reading: “Forgotten, not gone,” surveying recent literature and current perspectives on aging, at: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/old-age-carol-tavis/>

- Carol Orsborn is the inspired leader of a forum called *Fierce with Age*. She writes, blogs, and brings to life her vision, which she gladly shares with others. *For Fierce with Age: The Digest of Boomer Wisdom, Inspiration and Spirituality*, click [HERE](#)

- Major links for seniors hoping to continue living at home, including many of the different resources that national organizations provide for people. <https://www.aginginplace.org/10-resources-for-living-independently-as-a-senior/>

ANNOUNCEMENTS

*A New Open Access Journal

Innovation In Aging. Oxford University Press.
[Academic.oup.com/innovateage](https://academic.oup.com/innovateage)

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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

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