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**THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER**

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The Positive Aging Newsletter by Kenneth and Mary Gergen  
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"THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING"  
Wall Street Journal  
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**\*\*\* COMMENTARY: Spirituality and Life Beyond Planning**

One thing we learn as we grow older is that planning has its limits. Regardless of our best, rational efforts to set things in a promising direction - in relationships, professional life, economically, or socially – unexpected things happen. Recently I was intrigued by a commentary by Jacob J. Staub called “Spirituality and Well-Being,” published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The theme of the column treated the efforts of humans to control their destinies, and the futility of trying to do so. As the old Yiddish proverb goes, “Humans plan, and God laughs.”

In order to deal with the unexpected twists and turns that create havoc with our carefully planned lives, Staub suggests we explore a spiritual approach. A spiritual sensitivity may not change our situation, but it can help us to move more fluidly through the disappointments. In Staub’s terms, spirituality is an awareness of the mystery that underlies all of existence and a sense that all things are interconnected. Spirituality is not necessarily about God, and does not require any belief in supernatural interventions. The spiritual sensitivity he described can be found among Buddhists, Sufis, Cabalists, humanists, and ecologists as well. One of the important emphases in a spiritual orientation is the view that we are not in control of our destinies. Staub notes that people in recovery programs know this, but they are not the only ones who should. We should all be more prepared to “go with the flow,” feeling that we are all part of something much greater and more significant than our individual lives.

A spiritual approach also encourages us to recognize and appreciate our good fortunes. These too may be unpredictable. Recently at a memorial service, the widow remarked that she and her husband talked constantly of how lucky they had been to have experienced so many good years together. And too, because of the emphasis on the connection of all things, spiritual traditions kindle appreciation for our relationships, and a compassion for those who suffer. We received a card during the Thanksgiving season from a friend who lost both her husband and her son one day apart last December. The card carried this quotation from Epictetus, “He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has.” She wrote, “How lucky I have been, what beautiful memories I have, and how fortunate I am to have such very good friends. I am thankful and grateful.” This is a sentiment we should all share at this special time of the year.

Mary Gergen

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

#### **\* Think Good Thoughts and Live Longer**

In previous issues of this Newsletter we have reported several studies that strongly indicated a close relationship between optimism about aging and increased longevity. The present research adds weight to this view, and further fills out the picture. Here the researchers were interested in stereotypes about retiring. Some people fear retirement, what they will lose, the boredom, the indirection, and so on, while others see retirement as a gateway to new interests and adventures. This study assessed such views among a group of 1,000 people before their retirement. The research focused particularly on their positive and negative expectations, both in terms of physical activities and mental dispositions. The group was then followed for another 23 years. The question was whether their positive or negative stereotypes about retirement would be related to their longevity. In fact, the relationship was strong. In the case of psychological capabilities, those who viewed life after retirement positively added two and a half years to their life-span over those more negatively disposed. For those who were confident in their physical condition after retirement, four and a half years were added. Their confidence in the future was realized in a more positive future. These findings persisted in spite of age, gender, race, marital status, employment status, years of education, work attitudes, functional health, and self-rated health at the outset of the study

From: Retirement as Meaningful: Positive Retirement Stereotypes Associated with Longevity by Reuben Ng, Heather G. Allore, Joan K. Monin, and Becca R. Levy, *Journal of Social Issues*. 2016, 72 69–85.

#### **\* Intergenerational Approaches to Dementia**

Recently we had an opportunity to visit an intergenerational school in Cleveland, Ohio. We listened and watched as elderly volunteers participated in the educational process. They helped in tutoring, teaching literature, sharing personal history, and guiding the children in visits to local sites. Many of these volunteers had also been diagnosed with dementia. As research reveals, programs such as these are highly beneficial to older people. The present study reviewed the evidence on the impact of intergenerational activities – such as the Cleveland school - on older adults with dementia. Ten studies were examined for their results.

Overall, it was found that intergenerational approaches had a substantial impact on quality of life of the elderly. They experienced a reduction in stress,

reduced agitation, improved cognitive functioning, and better memory. Further, they were more constructively engaged in activities and had better social interaction. Most important for the development of intergenerational programs were the effects on relationships. For one, there was a shift in children's attitudes and acceptance of the elderly. They were less prejudiced and less prone toward stereotyping/infantilizing the older people with dementia. Such acceptance, in turn, provided an opportunity for the older adults with dementia to form genuine friendships in a "non-medicalized" environment. Taking a constructive and productive role in society increased self-worth, and enhanced their status as contributors to the community.

This review suggests that there is excellent potential for the use of interactive programs across generations as a cost-effective strategy for slowing the process of cognitive decline, promoting well-being for older adults with dementia, and increasing social capital. For educators, older volunteers with diverse cognitive capacities may provide a rich resource of staff to support and encourage the children.

From: Is There Anything Special About Intergenerational Approaches to Older People with Dementia? A Review by A-L. Park. *Journal of Alzheimers & Parkinsonism*, 2014, 4, 172. doi: 10.4172/2161-0460.1000172

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

**\* Who Looks to the Future: The Young or the Old?**

It is commonly believed that as we age, we tend to spend more time looking backward as opposed to forward. Unlike the young, with their nose to the window of the future, the elderly are more likely to ruminate about the past. Researchers at George Mason University set out to discover whether this is indeed true. In this study researchers spoke with more than 100 adults every day for 19 days. They asked the interviewees what they were thinking about, and whether it was about the past or the future. Surprisingly, the results indicated that older adults did not focus more on the past than younger ones. In fact, they were more likely to be thinking into the future than the younger folks.

From: Older adults think more about the future than young adults do. *Monitor on Psychology*, September, 2015. Pg. 18

## \* A Modeling Career Begins at 80

And here we mean a new career for a male! Wang Deshun has been called “China’s hottest grandfather,” in a newspaper account of a recent style show. Bare chested, strolling down the runway, he has become an idol for many Chinese. Determined to avoid mental and physical stagnation, Mr. Wang has explored new skills and ideas while devoting ample time to daily exercise. Last year, as he walked the runway for the first time, his physique causing a national sensation.

Wang takes obvious joy in subverting China’s image of what it means to be old. And old age in China begins relatively early. The legal retirement age for women is 50 for workers and 55 for civil servants, and 60 for most men. Being older in China typically means being respected, but also, often, sentimentalized. Someone as young as 50 may be addressed as “yeye” or “nainai” — grandpa or grandma — regardless of whether they have offspring. Mr. Wang is having none of that. “One way to tell if you’re old or not is to ask yourself, ‘Do you dare try something you’ve never done before?’”

Mr. Wang said he was always athletic. An avid swimmer as a child, he still swims more than half a mile each day. “Morning is my learning time,” he said. “I read books and news. From 3 to 6 p.m. is my exercise time, in a gym near my home.” He also drinks less alcohol now, he said, but that is about as far as his dietary restrictions go. “I am not picky at all about what I eat. I eat whatever I want.”

Mr. Wang was born in the northeastern city of Shenyang in 1936, one of nine children of a cook and a stay-at-home mother. At 14, a year after the Communist Party came to power in 1949, he began working as a streetcar conductor. At the Workers’ Cultural Palace in Shenyang, he took free lessons in singing, acting and dancing. He later took a job at a military factory and joined its art troupe, which entertained soldiers. Later he worked in radio, film and theater.

“People can change their life as many times as they wish,” he said. “Being mentally healthy means you know what you’re going to do....For example, a vegetable vendor, when he wakes up, he has a goal, he works hard. And when he finishes, he feels fulfilled.” For Mr. Wang, fulfillment comes in many forms: acting, modeling, exercising and creating art. And one day soon, he said, parachuting. That is the plan.

From: Wang Deshun, Model, 80 By Didi Kirsten Tatlow, *New York Times*, Asia Edition. Nov, 4, 2016.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/04/world/asia/china-wang-deshun-model-80.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>

## \* **Sweet Charity: Older People Give More**

Although there are many problems with research using MRI brain scans to study social behaviors, it is interesting to note research that supports a positive view of aging. In this case, Dr. Ulrich Mayr and his colleagues at the University of Oregon studied 80 university employees ranging in age from 18-67. The researchers scanned the volunteers' brains while they watched money being given either to charity or to themselves. The scans showed different levels of activity in the brain believed to be related to pleasure. Among those over 45, the brain's pleasure areas tended to become more active when they saw money donated to charity. In contrast, the younger people had more arousal when the money went to themselves. Dr. Leonardo Christov-Moore, from UCLA, who studies altruism said, "You become more benevolent, more altruistic as you get older." Research also supports this view: over half of all donations to charity are made by those over 60. Perhaps there is truth to the old adage that it is more blessed (and more satisfying) to give than to receive.

From: Sweet Charity: Older People Give More. *AARP Bulletin*, October, 2016, pg. 4.

### \*\*\* **SENIOR HEALTH RESOURCES**

We are indebted here to our reader, Marie Villeza from the Elder Impact, for sending us these excellent resources for healthier living. As Marie writes: Lately I've been devoting my focus to senior health — especially since only 28-34% of Americans aged 65-74 are physically active.

I've had the opportunity to speak with some of the elders in my community, and they said although they do *want* more physical activity, they feel limited in their options. Fortunately, inspiring others to get on their feet is my specialty! I've gathered some terrific resources on ways for seniors to lead happier, more active lives, but I need your help distributing them. What do you say — how about here?

[Transportation Options for Seniors Who Don't Drive](#)

[Outdoor Elderly Activities](#)

[Retiring in Your Own Home: How Baby Boomers Can Age in Place](#)

[The Healing Power of Pets for Elderly People](#)

[The Grandparent's Guide to Sharing Your Love of Classic Cars with Your Grandchild](#)

[Volunteer Abroad Programs for Senior Travelers](#)

[The Senior's Guide to Becoming a Real Estate Agent in Their Golden Years](#)

[Exercise Essentials for Healthy Aging](#)

[Exercising with Osteoporosis: Stay Active the Safe Way](#)

Here's to happier senior living — because they truly are the golden years!

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

\*J. Adam Milgram writes:

Dear Friends:

My book, *Something to Think About: The Challenges and Opportunities of Living and Aging* can now be purchased through Amazon or electronically on Kindle as can my previous work, *Education for Being..*

This book is a compilation of essays written monthly for the newsletter, *Healthwise*, of the Stein Institute for Research on Aging at the University of California, San Diego when I was the Executive Director.

While much is written about the negative aspects of the aging process, these essays paint a more positive picture and relate more to the renewed opportunities for growth and development that aging can bring. Enjoy.

\* We often give workshops on positive aging. This is a letter sent to us by Beverly Gans (and shared here with her permission), after a recent workshop in Cleveland with Peter Whitehouse:

Dear Peter, Mary and Ken,

I thoroughly enjoyed your talk last night. You may have wondered why I was grinning throughout, but made no comment. You were describing my mother, the most positive ager I know...though there are many like her, and they are the reason why I am looking forward to my seniority.

Mom is 95, living at Stone Gardens (assisted living), her decision entirely. She drove until two months ago (sometimes to Chautauqua for a day, by herself) when she decided it was time to sell her car. She works as a secretary (volunteer) in three Menorah Park offices: volunteer, hospice and development (where she works for one of my former colleagues!) She is more technologically proficient than anyone in her age group or even 20 years younger, teaches herself new knitting and crocheting techniques via YouTube, reads constantly, attends all lifelong learning courses offered by the Rose Institute, recommends to staff field trips for herself and her friends, sits on several planning committees, and loves the new Brain Health Institute, enjoying coloring books and beading in her not very spare time.

I love to be invited to dinner at Stone Gardens because Mom and her friends engage in lively conversation, and even when they have physical problems, which they do, they buck each other up and soldier on. Mom fractured her pelvis 4 months ago. It galvanized her. She rehabbed like her life depended on it and was walking again in two months.

The minute I left you I called her to tell her not only how proud she makes me, but how her perspective on and her attitude toward aging fills me with excitement about my future years. I know that with her as my role model, I will age positively.

I just subscribed to your newsletter and Mom and her friends will do the same, after I tell them all about you and your work! Thank you for reinforcing Mom's life lessons.

Beverly Gans

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

\* The American Society on Aging (ASA) Conference takes place March 20-24, in Chicago, IL. ASA is always looking for new models, innovative programs and research-to-practice presentations for the conference. This is a fabulous opportunity to share your program developments and new ideas with this conference community of nearly 3,000 multidisciplinary professionals who, like you, care about improving the lives of older adults. [www.asaging.org/aia](http://www.asaging.org/aia)

- The Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE), GSA's annual meeting and educational leadership conference is taking place March 9-12, 2017 in Miami Marriott Dadeland. This is the premier international forum for discussing ideas and issues in gerontological and geriatric education. The theme for 2017 is "The Future is Here: Educating a New Generation of Professionals in Aging Worldwide." [www.aghe.org/events/annual-meeting](http://www.aghe.org/events/annual-meeting)

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**\*\*\* 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](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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