

THE TAOS INSTITUTE Positive Aging



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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*

Inside this Issue:

- **COMMENTARY: From Vulnerability to Change-Ability**
- **RESEARCH:**
 - Resisting the Stranglehold of Ageism**
 - Brain Health Recommendations**
 - Connectivity and Meaning in the Second Half of Life**
- **OPPORTUNITIES and OPTIONS:**
 - Rescue our Future**
 - Amazing Grace**
 - Lifelong Learning**
- **BOOK REVIEW: *No Stopping Us Now: The Adventures of Older Women in American History* by Gail Collins**
- **INFORMATION FOR READERS**

COMMENTARY

***From Vulnerability to Change-Ability**

The past months have been a major challenge for us all. This has been especially true for older people, as many of the fatalities of the corona virus have been residents of communal living arrangements, such as nursing homes. High caution is certainly warranted. Yet, there is a more subtle challenge in play related to one's sense of self. Older people already suffer from a general stereotype that equates age with weakness and incapacities. As research indicates, there is also a strong tendency to apply this stereotype to oneself as one ages. As the logic goes, "If people grow weaker and more vulnerable as they age, and I am now aging, I must be weaker and more vulnerable." When it comes to shaping the future of society, this view of the self invites complacency and inactivity. "After all, what can I do? I am old and feeble."

Such feelings of incapacity may be all the more intensified in terms of the many additional currents of change. The warming of the globe brings weather dynamics never before experienced, and conflicts at every level of life prevent effective action. Then there are political shifts in motion that favor totalitarianism, suppression, and isolationism. Self-interested economic policies increasingly favor the *haves* over the *have nots*, and the exploitation of the environment. And there is the simultaneous cry of those seeking justice, truth, and human rights. As it now stands, the world's people confront a vast, complex array of major challenges, some the most serious in the history of humankind.

As former President Obama recently said in response to major social unrest in the U.S., "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek." So, leaving the challenge to others, because one feels, or is treated as "weak, vulnerable and inept," should not be an option. Everyone is needed.

Consider the contributions that older people can offer. There is first the lifetime of experience. One has confronted challenges of all kinds, has weathered storms, and experienced success and failure. One has witnessed what has worked and what has failed, the potentials of collaboration and of conflict, the growth and deterioration of trust, and more. One also has memories of the past against which to compare the present, and gauge our uncertain movements into the future. As research on aging reveals, the older population is essentially the repository of wisdom for a society. They have the potential to balance pros and cons, to consider a broader array of relevant factors, and to resist being swept away by the prevailing passions of the moment. These are vital resources.

The numbers of the older population are also swelling. With the average life-span increasing, so does the proportion of the population over 70. In effect, the political power of this group is steadily expanding. We are thus positioned so wisdom can go to work. In Obama's words, "Something better awaits us so long as we have the courage to keep reaching, to keep working, to keep fighting." We have enormous capacities for shaping the future.

- Mary and Ken Gergen

*****RESEARCH*****

***Resisting the Stranglehold of Ageism**

In our opening commentary, we mentioned the way ageist stereotypes can creep into our own conceptions of who we are. This can be crippling, as they breed self-doubt, timidity, and inactivity. The present research offers a telling illustration.

In this study, 80 participants between the ages of 60-93, average age 75, were asked to take a brief cognitive test that detects preliminary symptoms of dementia. The plan of the study was to introduce an ageist stereotype before presenting the test, one that might undermine one's performance. Specifically if one is reminded that one is old and possibly senile, the threat of this possibility would disrupt one's normal thinking. Participants were tested individually, either at home or at a local community center by a graduate student. Randomly chosen participants in the experimental tradition, were told that younger people had taken the test. In effect, they were reminded that they were old, and by implication would be compared with the young. Participants in the control condition were told that there were no age differences between younger and older people on the test.

As the results showed, under conditions of threat, some 40% of the participants performed poorly on the test. This meant that if they took the test in a clinic, they would be diagnosed as having pre-dementia, which could have very serious consequences for the individual and his or her family. In the control condition, without the threat, only 10% would be judged as having pre-dementia. And even here, one cannot be sure that the private fears of the participants impaired their performance.

The research emphasizes how important it is to combat ageist stereotypes. For older people this means active resistance, both personally and publicly. For the young, it is to say that the fun of ridiculing the elderly today, may return to crush the fun of later life.

From: Negative aging stereotypes impair performance on brief cognitive tests used to screen for predementia by Marie Mazerolle, et al, *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, 2017, 72, 932-936

***Brain Health Recommendations**

How shall we keep our brains healthy? Some recommendations gleaned from the medical world for keeping them in tip top shape.

1. Physical activity. Aim for 150 minutes of physical activity a week.
2. Hydration. Drinking water and juices can help keep our brains in good shape.
3. Novel challenges. Confronting ourselves with learning opportunities that are new and interesting.
4. Living a Mediterranean lifestyle. Eating fresh vegetables and fruits, especially those with vibrant colors. Getting out and socializing with others.
5. Restfulness. Sleeping at least 7 hours a night, and enjoy the benefits of relaxation, perhaps meditation during the day.

From: Brain Health in Memory Care by Krystal Culler, Cathee Steghl, Patrick Cleary & Caroline Larimore. *Today's Geriatric Medicine*, July August, 2020, 22-25.

*** Connectivity and Meaning in the Second Half of Life**

Christopher Tovey is a 70 year old therapist, who is investigating how people find meaning, purpose and fulfillment in later life, and ways that counseling can be helpful in this endeavor. He kindly sent on articles to the Newsletter, from which this is excerpted:

I am striving to make a positive difference to the well-being of adults over 65 who require practical, emotional and spiritual support, by improving their access to appropriate counseling services which address their needs and wishes. I have found that a sensitive facilitation process through which people can tell their personal stories and find meaning in past, present and future existence, seemed to alleviate their distress and enable my older clients to maintain, or regain, their resilience and adapt pro-actively to ongoing change and transition in their lives.

I am interested in the idea that people in later life continue to have the learning and self-development potential to enjoy unique and varied forms of, what Lars Tornstam calls, 'gero-transcendence'. I contend that meaning flows from our connectivity. It stems from the way in which we are connected and engaged with the fundamental aspects of who we are. It brings our values and beliefs together with

our emotional response to the world. All these elements are needed to make sense of our present experiences as well as giving us a sense of direction in life. I share Ken Gergen's valuable 'relational recovery' perspective of counseling, viewing therapist and client as "*engaged in a subtle and complex dance of co-action, a dance in which meaning is continuously in motion, and the outcomes of which may transform the relational life of the client*".

Excerpted from: Existential Therapy and Lifelong Learning by Christopher Tovey
kenilworthcounselling.co.uk

*****OPPORTUNITIES and OPTIONS*****

We typically feature relevant items from the news at this juncture in the Newsletter. However, the intense news focus on the pandemic and on politics these past months offered all too little of relevance to the Newsletter. This, in turn, inspired us to share more fully the offerings of readers and others who are “in the conversation.”

*** Rescue our Future**

Glenn Sankatsing, a reader and a board member of *Rescue Our Future Foundation* wrote to us in hopes that newsletter readers might join into dialogue on the risks that threaten our stay on Earth:

In the spirit of offering a global forum to bring together critical minds and concerned people for discussion and dialogue on rescuing humanity's future, the Foundation brought out its first publication *Quest to Rescue Our Future*, concerning the precarious state the journey of humanity has now entered. Beyond a wake-up call, it inspires the hope that a massive mobilization of human moral reserves can still allow humanity to take its future in its own hands. The many difficult challenges and deep questions that such a quest implies cannot be met by individuals alone – however dedicated – but they call for the joint intellectual and spiritual effort of all committed persons and organizations around the globe. New spaces where thinkers from different traditions and worldviews can reflect together will open the avenue for a respectful encounter of a multitude of ideas that can shape the road forward to safeguard the future of humanity. In the light of such a global encounter, the Foundation invites you to read and critically discuss *Quest to Rescue Our Future* (www.rescueourfuture.org/sample.pdf) and join the efforts of humanity to find ways to regain command of its destiny in a culture of hope.... “Humanity does not seem to be out of options, but we need to move quickly, because we can run out of time... It is now or never, hence now.” The time

is ripe to team up with all encouraging initiatives around the world to shape a better future for humanity.

***Amazing Grace**

One of the web resources with which we have felt a special affinity originates in South Africa and is the brainchild and heartchild of Grace, a woman who has long been a figure in the Conscious Aging movement. The website is aptly called A Mind of Grace (<https://www.amindofgrace.co.za/>) The site features an array of inspiring features, centered around a quite fascinating blog. This past month we were especially struck by Grace's new initiative, the formation of a Ted Circle. These circles are linked to the well-known Ted Talks, and invite people to develop discussion groups that can make use of the talks themselves. Organizing a dozen elders in the community, this vibrant group has taken on the topic of Searching for Transcendence, something beyond the merely material world of daily life. We are grateful to Grace for sharing the rich adventures of the group. <https://www.amindofgrace.co.za/searching-for-transcendence/>

*** Lifelong Learning**

We have long been advocates of the Siegal *Lifelong Learning Program* from Case Western Reserve University. The program offers people of all ages opportunities to explore a wide range of fascinating topics. Many of the learning experiences are online, and some of them free of charge. Recently they sent out a list of very interesting online courses that are available through their site. For example, "Hamilton: Fact and Fiction, Past and Present". The course takes place Mondays, July 6-27. Throughout the summer, diverse courses are offered from Shakespeare to Socrates and the Olympic Games. These courses take place in "real time" with regular professors. The Siegal program also offers Remote Lectures, such as "Media Literacy: Fake News, Faux News? Real News or Raw News? And How to Tell the Difference," a one hour summary of this fascinating topic. These programs can be watched at any time. The Siegal website also offers travel opportunities and other educational opportunities. See: <https://Case.edu/lifelonglearning/>

*****BOOK REVIEW*****

No Stopping Us Now: The Adventures of Older Women in American History by Gail Collins, Little Brown & Co. 2009.

This book has been sitting on my shelf for some years now, but given the current debate on how we understand our histories, I thought it was a good time for revisiting the work:

Thinking about our history classes, from 1st grade to college, we might have difficulty in recalling many female figures - young or old - featured there. Partly this is because what passes for history is usually tied to power struggles - political, religious, economic and so on. Because women are stereotyped as “the weaker sex,” they simply don’t count in the “making of history.” In her book, Gail Collins opens our eyes to the older women who made a difference in American history. Here Collins describes the lives of well-known figures such as Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony and Eleanor Roosevelt. However, she then turns to biases in writing history itself.

Specifically, Collins emphasizes the more subtle ways in which older women contribute to the course of history. Women’s ways of influencing society were often more indirect and domestically turned than men’s. For example, Collins profiles Lydia Maria Child. Born in 1808, she became famous for her book, *The Frugal Housewife*. As a celebrity, she traveled across the country giving lectures on how to manage a household. Her influence on the formation of the household and the role of the woman is significant. Interestingly, she also published a book strongly advocating the emancipation of slaves, the first white woman to do so. She also wrote in support of Native American rights and women’s rights.

Much of the book outlines the place of older women in the general workings of society, especially the importance of older women in families and in communities. Many of the stories have a humorous edge as she attends to women’s place in gender relations. Especially significant, however, is the emphasis on the way in which older women managed to control much of social life.

Collins emphasizes the advantages that older women have today, as compared to the past. “Now middle-age women looking at census projections may start thinking about what kind of career they’ll want in their 80’s. ...it seems as if nothing, including age, can slow us down.” - MMG

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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

- 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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