

The Positive Aging Newsletter by Kenneth and Mary Gergen
Dedicated to productive dialogue between research and practice
Sponsored by the Web-based Health Education Foundation and the Taos Institute

In this issue

- COMMENTARY: The Sweet Symbolism of Being Senior
- RESEARCH: Emotional Complexity: A Gift of Age
- RESEARCH: Aging and the Fear of Death
- IN THE NEWS
- READERS RESPOND
- BOOK REVIEWS
- ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPCOMING EVENTS
- Information for Readers

COMMENTARY: The Sweet Symbolism of Being Senior

We recently had the good fortune of attending a conference celebrating the 20TH anniversary of the Kensington Consultation Centre. KCC is dedicated to providing assistance to individuals and organizations, and training future therapists and consultants. The audience for the event was largely composed of young students training in systemic theory. The speakers, in contrast, were largely individuals quite senior in years, men and women whose work had inspired the founding of the institution and set the intellectual tone for its development. What we found remarkable in these meetings was the deep dedication of the audience to these senior contributors. Their stories of the early years proved utterly fascinating; their accounts of their life over these years mesmerizing; and their current wisdom intriguing. In one case a session was devoted to Jean Franco Cecchin, an Italian contributor who had recently passed away. In another session the audience told personal stories about experiences with seniors who had been inspirational to them.

For us these meetings demonstrated one of the most important and seldom recognized assets acquired through aging: the sweet symbolism of being senior. We live our lives beholden largely to those older than we: parents, teachers, coaches, supervisors, bosses, religious leaders, and so on. And, while we often struggle for independence and typically acquire our own legion of juniors, those above us occupy a special place of honor. It is just such individuals who have served as our life supports, our models, and our guides. It is they who have taken an interest in our well being, applauded our successes, and nurtured us when we failed. Further, it is they who provide us with an historical location. With their stories they tell us where we came from, and invite us to reflect on what it is we will leave behind of ourselves.

We flew to London the day of the terrorist bombings, and left over a week later. We were struck there by the ability of the Londoners to rapidly restore order. We seemed to be witnessing an expression of the famed British "stiff upper lip." And was this resolve not dependent on the actions of their elders as they resisted the blitz of World War II? The sweet symbolism of their elders helped carry the day. Senior citizens are icons of deep and enduring significance. So today, if you feel you have gained senior status, celebrate your specialness.

- Ken and Mary Gergen

RESEARCH: Emotional Complexity: A Gift of Age

In earlier editions of this Newsletter we have featured research demonstrating the increased capacity of the elderly to take multiple perspectives into account. This capacity is often identified with wisdom. But what about emotional wisdom? Do we develop with age a more complex emotional life?

To explore this possibility adults were shown videos in which scenes of injustice were displayed. In one, a husband yells at and hits his wife; in another an intimidating teen bullies another; and in a third, a man with a lisp is mocked by another man. The research participants were asked to

rate their reactions, in particular the level of their anger, disgust, contempt and sadness. The participants were then divided into two groups, older adults (from 63-85) and a younger (18-32) sample.

Overall, the results indicated that over the various scenes depicted, the mature adults were more likely to report more evenly felt emotional responses than the younger people. In every case they experienced a greater mix of emotions. They felt about equally some combination of anger, disgust, contempt and sadness. In explaining their findings, the researchers suggested that the greater life experiences on the part of the older people increases the number of associations between past and current life experiences, which led them to a more complex understanding of a situation and thus a greater mix of emotions.

Interestingly, the results indicated that the intensity of older adults' emotions was also higher than that of the younger people. This contradicts the frequently held notion that as people age they come to feel less intensely about things. Older adults in this study also reported more contempt for the violators than younger viewers. Younger viewers were most likely, above all, to report being angry at the injustice scenes.

From: Charles, Susan Turk, (2005) Viewing injustice: Greater emotion heterogeneity with age by. *Psychology and Aging*, 2005, 20, 159-164.

RESEARCH: Aging and the Fear of Death

We don't commonly think of adolescents and middle-aged adults as dwelling on fears of death. After all, death should be postponed by decades. It is the elderly who should justifiably be more fearful. Is this possibly the reason that the elderly are more likely to turn to religion? Does religious belief help to reduce such fears?

To explore this and related issues, a longitudinal study was conducted with a representative sample of people born in the San Francisco East Bay Area in the 1920's. The participants, now in their 60's and 70's, were given the Death Attitudes Profile to assess fear of death and dying. Religiousness was measured from in-depth interviews conducted first in middle age and then in the present. To receive a high score on religiousness, the participant had to exhibit evidence that their beliefs were accompanied by regular church attendance and systematic engagement in other religious activities, such as prayer.

As the findings revealed, contrary to common expectations, the participants in their mid-70's were less fearful of dying than their younger peers. One conjecture is that experiencing more negative life events, such as illnesses and bereavement, helps to develop habits of thinking and feeling that reduce anxiety. We learn to cope with tragedy. It is also possible that the more one ponders "the inevitable", the more one builds good psychological defenses to ward off anxiety.

What about the role of religious beliefs. Here the research indicated that there is no direct relationship between religiousness and fear of death and dying. It was indeed found that the most religious were among the least fearful of death. But it was also the case that the least religious were roughly equal in their lack of fear. It was the moderately religious people who feared death the most. A little religion may raise questions of mortality, but without providing firm reassurance.

From: Wink, P. and Scott, J. (2005) Does Religiousness Buffer Against the Fear of Death and Dying in Late Adulthood? Findings from a Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Gerontology, Psychological Sciences*, 2005, 60B, P207-P214.

IN THE NEWS

INSPIRED, NOT RETIRED

Ken Dychtwald, CEO of Age Wave, helped direct an international study on "The Future of Retirement" sponsored by the HSBC Bank. 11,500 adults in 10 countries were asked questions about how they envisioned their futures. The major finding of this study is the overwhelming agreement among those surveyed that they do not want to be judged by their age alone; they also want to be judged by their energy, their attitude and what they are contributing to the world.

In the more developed countries, such as the United States, Canada, Britain, France and Hong Kong, people rejected the notion of retiring, but also of "just more of the same." What they wanted were new beginnings with new challenges. They wanted to be involved, productive and connected within the new lifestyle. As Dychtwald concluded, "I don't think it's aging that frightens people. It's the fear of becoming uninspired and unwilling to try new things. In essence, opening yourself up to new experiences and making new friends is the ideal anti-aging medicine."

Full report: www.hsbc.com/futureofretirement From: "inspired, not retired" by Ken Dychtwald and Catherine Fredman. Special Advertising supplement, New York Times, May 22,2005

DEMEDICALIZE MENOPAUSE

An independent panel authorized by NIH reported that menopause should not be viewed as a disease. Most women do not suffer disabling symptoms as they go through it. The current trend to medicalize menopause leads to overuse of treatments approaches that can carry serious risks. If women do have severe and persistent menopausal symptoms, the treatment of choice is low-dose estrogen therapy. The panel also urged further research into non-hormonal treatments, as not all women should take estrogen, given their medical histories.

From: NIH Panel calls for Demedicalization" of Menopause. "Washington News" from Gerontology News, May, 2005, pg. 4.

SEX IS HERE TO STAY: AARP POLL OF ADULTS

In 2004 AARP conducted a representative national survey of over 1600 adults ages 45 and older on the topic of their sex lives. Some of the highlights are as follows:

- 63% of people with partners described their sex lives as somewhat to extremely satisfied. (The rest rated it as boring or worse).
- 66% of men and 48% of women said that satisfying sex is important to their quality of life. The younger the woman, the more important it is.
- Helen Gurley Brown, 83, author of the 1962 best-seller, *Sex and the Single Girl*, concluded that many older women do not have sexual partners so they are making the best of a bad situation.
- In terms of important aspects of one's quality of life, good spirits, good health, close ties with friends and family, financial security, spiritual well-being, and a good relationship with a partner were all rated as more important than a fulfilling sexual connection.
- 22% of men have tried Viagra, Levitra, Cialis or other drugs, hormones, or other treatments to enhance their ability to have sturdy penile erections. The majority (68%) say it has increased their sexual satisfaction
- Women in all age groups report that their sexual satisfaction has been enhanced by their partner's use of the drugs.
- 42% of men who tried penile erection enhancing treatments have stopped using them; half said they didn't work. It is not clear which of the treatments did not work, but many products on the market have not been scientifically tested. (Also Michael Kimmel, editor of *Men and Masculinities*, points out that "These drugs act only on the body, not on the mind and heart.")
- 95% in all age groups report they would not engage in any form of extramarital sex without their partner's approval.
- About 50% of women 45-49 have masturbated in the past six months; about 20% of women over 70 have done so.
- 60% of men have masturbated during the last six months in all age categories.
- Negotiating age-related sexual issues is part of a good long-term relationship. Brown rejected the notion that you can't be sexual because you have health problems. As one woman reported, "Even when my husband couldn't have intercourse, he still held and kissed me and touched me in ways that satisfied me. It wasn't all about him; it was about us."

From: *Sex in America* by Susan Jacoby, AARP, *The Magazine*, July & August, 2005, 54-58, 82. Also www.aarpmagazine.org/relationships for more information on the poll.

READERS RESPOND

Colette Herrick, of the executive coaching and organizational consulting firm, Insight Shift, writes:

Here are two books that I have recently read that are profoundly inspirational. *Healing Through Darkness: The Transforming Vision of St. Francis in an Age of Anxiety*. It is particularly salient for the world we live in post 9/11. St. Francis of Assisi was a radically appreciative leader. The prayer of St Francis being such a powerful example of that! The book is written by Richard Rohr, O.F.M., an indefatigable appreciative leader and prolific writer. He has a center in Albuquerque called the Center for Action and Contemplation. The Center puts out a monthly newsletter called Radical Grace. The newsletter and books can be ordered through the web site:

<http://www.cacradicalgrace.org/>

The other book is *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man who Would Cure the World* by Pulitzer Prize writer, Tracey Kidder. Again I found this book profoundly inspiring and a compelling call to contributing to the world through the example of Paul Farmer (who no doubt will win the Nobel Prize someday!) for his visionary and passionate commitment to the sick and poor. I was very much reminded of Robert Quinn's description of fundamental (transformational) leadership in how Dr. Farmer lives his life -- inner directed, other-focused, purpose-driven and externally open.

I have also found Robert Quinn's books *Deep Change, How Ordinary People Can Transform the World*, and *Building the Bridge as You Walk on It* ---invaluable guides for living and leading positive change. There is a terrific article by Robert Quinn on fundamental leadership in the July-August – Harvard Business Review

Hope this helps! May we all be inspired by the good works of each other to be contributions to the world.

BOOK REVIEWS

THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE: GETTING ON WITH GETTING ON, Compiled and illustrated by John Burningham, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003.

The Time of Your Life puts together short essays and quotations, some familiar, but many minted freshly for this volume on aging. Heavy on British notables, the book presents the many rewarding and positive aspects of aging. But of course, there are a few cranks mixed in for good measure. Words of wisdom from Lewis Carroll, William Shakespeare, and Jonathan Swift, among others, also spice the pages. From Roman antiquity, we discover that Cicero believed that defects found in the aged "arise from their temperament and not from old age." Oliver Goldsmith, playwright from the 1700's was very optimistic, in saying, "I love everything that's old: old friends, old times, old manners, old books, old wine." And Maurice Chevalier on his seventy second birthday provided one of our favorite lines, "Old age isn't so bad when you consider the alternative."

The book provides a rich and charming selection of ideas on aging, some we share, and some we don't. Occasionally one finds something quite unusual, as in Pablo Picasso's line, "Age only matters when one is aging. Now that I have arrived at a great age, I might just as well be twenty."

In addition to short sayings, poems, and essays the book contains illustrations, photographs, and even a crossword puzzle for the addicts. This is a pleasant read for a holiday afternoon.

USING IT WHILE LOSING IT, by Irving and Suzanne Sarnoff, Universe, 2005.

As the title of this book suggests, there are ways of dealing with "losing it", whatever "it" might be - retiring, moving, redecorating, making love, aches and pains, These engaging autobiographical stories describe how Irving and Suzanne Sarnoff overcome some of the troubling features of this stage of life. Beginning at the peak of their co-career with a hilarious account of their appearance on the David Letterman Show, the authors go on to portray their resistance to being identified as senior citizens and their loss of occupational roles and routines. *Using It While Losing It* conveys a hopeful message. By mobilizing the will to laugh at themselves, the Sarnoffs avoided stagnation in self-pitying despair, sustained their intimacy, and continued to cooperate in new creative work.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND UPCOMING EVENTS

American Society on Aging, East Coast, Philadelphia, PA
September 12-15, 2005. Autumn series on aging. Sheraton University City Hotel.
Continuing education for professionals who work with older adults and their family members.
1-800-537-9728 www.asaging.org/autumn-series

Life @50+: AARP's National Event and Expo. Speakers, entertainment, exhibitions, music.
September 29-October 1,
2005. New Orleans Morial Convention Center.
www.aarp.org/events

Viva 50 Plus, World Ageing and Generations Congress, Sept. 2005
St. Gallen, Switzerland
Website: www.viva50plus.org
Contact Information: [Info@viva50plus.org/](mailto:Info@viva50plus.org)

The Taos Institute presents "Social Construction: A Celebration of Collaborative Practices". October 6-9, 2005, Taos, New Mexico.
The event will include presentations of collaborative practices in organizations, therapy, education, medicine, social work, and positive aging. For conference information and CE information visit:
www.taosinstituteconference.net

The Gerontological Society of America 58th Annual Scientific Meeting
November 18-22, 2005 Hilton New Orleans Riverside,
www.geron.org

Invest in Aging, Strengthening Families, Communities and Ourselves
Joint Conference of the National Council on the Aging, and the American Society on Aging
March 16-19, 2006 Anaheim, CA.

Information for Readers

- To subscribe to the Positive Aging Newsletter, go to the HealthandAge.com subscription page at:
<http://www.healthandage.com/Home/gm=22> or if you prefer, write to Mary Gergen at gv4@psu.edu

- Questions & Feedbacks

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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