

Creating a Balanced Understanding of Aging **by Ron Pevny**

The reason the Positive Aging Movement has emerged so strongly in the past 10-15 years is that the dominant view of aging has fallen VERY short in providing an accurate picture that truly serves individuals as we age and our society as a whole. Yes, most of us do suffer losses and diminishment of certain of our capacities as we age; caregiving, helping to give our elders safe environments, and helping them cope with losses are such important ways of offering our service. AND, the reality is that our culture in general has come to define our elder chapters by these losses and diminishment. This all-too-narrow understanding of aging relegates older adults to being seen primarily as needy, diminished beings who will likely require expensive care, while no longer having a relevant role to play in society as they live out the ever-increasing number of years after retirement age. And because it is so pervasive, most of us have internalized these beliefs about aging, in ways that are often unconscious. So, a key role that Positive Aging plays is to challenge us to take a serious, honest look at the beliefs we carry about aging and how they might be finding expression in our lives

Positive Aging, and in particular Conscious Eldering, which focuses on continuing emotional and spiritual growth in the elder years, focuses on the other side of the coin. The more we learn about human potential for growth throughout the entire lifespan, the more apparent becomes the need for this perspective. I believe the key tenets of Conscious Eldering can be summed up in four words: Belief; Baggage; Purpose; and Community.

Belief

A recent study, well publicized in the press, confirmed what many of us have long known, and which lies at the heart of most of the world's spiritual and growth traditions. What we believe shapes who we become. Those who believe they can stay healthy, have fulfillment and meaningful relationships, and somehow serve others in their elder years do indeed tend to stay healthy (living on average 7.5 years longer), feel more fulfilled, and find ways to be of service, as contrasted with those who believe it's all a downhill slide after retirement. We all create lifestyles that reflect and support our beliefs, and our lifestyles shape the way we age.

Throughout recorded human history, the role of elder was an honored role, with elders expected to contribute their wisdom and gifts in meaningful ways to their community. We don't live in such societies; our culture reveres youth and newness and doesn't even recognize the role of elder. But the human psyche doesn't change just because our society doesn't see elders as relevant to its wellbeing, with something to give that's as important as the contributions of younger people. There is an elder in each of us that wants to emerge as we age; but we need to believe in our potential for personal growth, meaning and service or it may never see the light of day. We have to believe that it is possible for us to aim high, rather than just spending our later years in a holding pattern not aiming for much of anything, as seems to be the case with so many people. Is it any wonder that elders have such disproportionately high rates of depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide when they have no brighter vision to help them see this as a unique time of life with its own rewards and fulfillment?

Baggage

Having a positive vision for our elder years is important, but we won't get very far with making it a reality if we are worn down with lots of emotional baggage accumulated throughout long lives. We all know many older adults who have lost motivation, joy, energy, passion—and it is often assumed that is the inevitable result of aging. While we all lose some physical energy as we age, Conscious Eldering sees much of the loss of energy and motivation as being due to regrets, resentments, unprocessed grief, and old stories about our lives and worth that so many of us carry into our older years. We become beaten down by life, with little energy to engage with life and others and to thrive. There is much value in doing life review work. It can help us see the personal strengths, passions and talents we can carry forward into our elder years. And it can help make us aware of those unprocessed drains on our energy that, with some effort, can be healed, freeing up energy to support our aliveness as we age.

Purpose

Various researchers into healthy longevity have found that most important correlate of healthy longevity is purpose; having a reason to get up in the morning that is bigger than oneself. I find it a sad fact that so many people in today's world feel that whatever legacy they will leave has been created by the time they reach retirement age. Many believe that, after working hard all their lives, they deserve to live just for themselves in their final chapters. With many people living 20 or 30 years after retirement age, that's a lot of

time to live just for oneself. If we define legacy as the mark our lives make on those whose lives we touch, and not just the contributions we make in the workplace, then we have the opportunity to create a wonderful legacy of our elder years, regardless of the state of our health and finances.

I think often of a woman I knew named Marguerite Paulek. When she was well into her 80s Marguerite came to talk to the Cub Scout troop I led about her wonderful life as a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in LaPlata County. The kids and I were enthralled as she shared the story of the events that helped shape her life. We saw a true elder that day, fulfilling the historical role of elder as a mentor, storyteller and teacher to younger people. A while later, when she and her husband Victor had to move to a local nursing home, Marguerite became a beacon of light and joy to many other residents who just wanted to be with her to experience her joy and optimism. Marguerite had a purpose, which kept her alive, vital and relevant until her dying day.

Community

All the studies on aging well say that having healthy relationships is crucial to wellbeing. It's not just the number of people you have in your life. It's about having people with whom you can share what is truly meaningful to you—your doubts and fears, your joys and visions for the future—knowing that these others really care about you and you care about them. It's about having those in your life who bring out the best in you, rather than draining your energy and optimism.

An empowering vision for aging balances the reality of loss and decline with understanding of an inner call to the growth and fulfillment that is possible if we have the courage to aim high in our elder chapters. Aging consciously is a balancing act, acknowledging the reality of losses and of mortality while using these to help us savor and fully embrace each moment of our one precious elderhood.

