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EDITOR’S NOTE

The year 2011 ushers in the advent of “senior citizenship” for the first wave of “Baby Boomers” (born in 1946). They turn, or have turned, 65 years old and will be followed by scores more in the succeeding years. The aging of the population by this largest cohort group in history constitutes an emerging worldwide phenomenon, unprecedented in nature—thus catalyzing a concern that is appearing on the radar screens of many disciplines. In addition to the medical community and those involved in health care, public policy issues, and the economy—individuals, organizations, and communities are beginning to question the challenges as well as potential opportunities and possible social benefits inherent in having such a sizeable group of individuals living longer on this planet.

Whether one accesses US Census and National Institute on Aging data, the many regional reports emerging from an array of countries, or the more global efforts of the United Nations Population Division, the percentage of individuals over 65 years old is dramatically increasing, with the 85–90+ age group witnessing a surge as well. Although sources may have slight variations on figures offered, the theme is consistent: the world’s population is aging. As reflected in several of the articles in this volume, the Baby Boomer cohort, based on sheer numbers alone, will initiate a trend over the next few decades of older individuals outnumbering children on the planet.

Befittingly, the end of 2011 (with the first wave of “Baby Boomers” now 65) is a most meaningful time to introduce this special theme issue of the Journal focusing on transpersonal gerontology, an emerging movement of both study and practice in which transpersonal psychology and transpersonal aspects of related disciplines partner with gerontology, illuminating and advocating for the growth potential inherent in the older years.

For several years I have had the pleasure of working closely with Quinton Wacks in bringing this volume to fruition. He first approached us with the seed of the idea, followed by a proposal reviewed by a JTP editorial team and officers of the Association. Peer review of manuscripts, and subsequent editorial partnership with the selected authors, has resulted in a volume that serves as a springboard to increase awareness and further grow Transpersonal Gerontology as an area of study and practice.

As a lead into the issue we honor and pay tribute to a long standing clinician, theorist, and mentor to many: James F. T. Bugental, editorial board member of the Journal since 1969. We thank G. Kenneth Bradford and Myrtle Heery for sharing their “In Memoriam” reflections and tributes to an individual who has bequeathed the transpersonal arena and the planet with quite a legacy.
Wacks' lead article on reflections, insights, and projections regarding transpersonal gerontology as an emerging area of study and practice is followed by key authors, steeped for decades in the developmental issues relevant to maturation. All have contributed freshly crafted articles for this volume: Robert Atchley extends his work on spirituality and aging by connecting it to the transpersonal terrain, Lars Tornstam further illuminates his theory of gerotranscendence, and Harry R. (Rick) Moody investigates the power of dreams in effecting one’s further development for the gerontological years. Emanating from experiential origins in helping others with end-of-life issues, Christel Lukoff and Association for Transpersonal Psychology co-president David Lukoff report on their analysis of transpersonal themes in folktales from around the world and their international testing for use in end-of-life issues, while Institute of Noetic Sciences President and CEO Marilyn Schlitz, and colleagues Cassandra Vieten and Kathleen Erickson-Freeman, report on their continuing research regarding positive worldview transformation and relate it to conscious aging.

Concluding the articles in this volume are two insightful essays, offering experiential knowledge with regard to transpersonal ways of living and being in the “elder” years. Ram Dass (aka Dr. Richard Alpert) and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi both invite the reader into their illuminating experiential journey, which may serve as a sneak preview for many into the lived transpersonal aspects of the gerontological years. Both articles have the potential to raise additional areas of research and practice for the growing movement.

In lieu of our regular JTP features of Book Reviews and Books Our Editors are Reading we offer recommendations for further thematic reading, presented by Edmund Sherman, Myrtle Heery, and Susan McFadden, as further discussed by Quinton Wacks in his Guest Editor’s Note. He also contributes readings to this section.

We are most pleased to present to you this special theme issue that captures the nature of Transpersonal Gerontology as a movement and an emerging area of study and practice and invite you to join us in its further development. I welcome our guest editor, Quinton Wacks, who offers his reflections on this special theme issue and elaborates upon the contents.

MB
Falls Church, VA USA
GUEST EDITOR’S NOTE

First and foremost, this Guest Editor wants to thank Dr. Marcie Boucouvalas, the Editor of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, for her approval of my proposal to publish a special issue on “transpersonal gerontology.” Without her wisdom and trust, as well as guidance, in this project, we would not have this publication and all that may come from it. Its topic is especially significant for those of us who grew up as “transpersonalists” and are now rapidly approaching or have already entered our retirement years.

This volume introduces the reader to the new area of transpersonal gerontology, an integration of transpersonal psychology and gerontology. The overriding rationale for this integration is to give humankind the gift of much needed new meaning, purpose and possibility(s) for the later years of all of us, and secondarily, to honor the consciousness raising generation of the older boomers and beyond and to prepare society once again for this generation’s entrance into a new phase of life. The contributors include the top scholars in late life spirituality, conscious aging, gerotranscendence, and “spiritual eldering.”

We know much about late life religion and religiosity and even have a journal to address religion and gerontology, but neither that particular knowledge base nor journal adequately address the spirituality that lies within, beyond and above religion. Today, there is a growing awareness of the vital differences between religion and spirituality. This theme issue heralds the needed consideration of the place and experience of both spirituality and the entire consciousness movement in the later years highlighting the theory, research, and practice that indicate their presence and special role and expression in our senior years.

Articles included in this volume range from an extensive introductory overview of the new field, to the leading research in the area of late life spirituality, to elder dreaming and stories for and from the dying, and to a life’s work remembered. Each author was asked to include a section on how they practiced and lived as a transpersonal gerontologist. The first article by Quinton Wacks comes from a 25 year exploration of the literature and practices of late life spirituality described under the headings of elements, applications, practices, and needed research and services for the new area with practices ranging from “The Five Remembrances” of Buddhism to using Alzheimer’s disease and conscious dying as spiritual practice. In the last section he orients his thoughts towards the future of transpersonal gerontology and issues an invitation for readers to offer their own future for our emerging field of study and practice.

Robert Atchley, in his article “How Spiritual Experience and Development Interact with Aging” found through his longitudinal research that middle and

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old age are indeed when spiritual concerns, experiences and development become increasingly important. His findings are shared through first person accounts of his interviews and provide a research basis for this new movement.

Lars Tornstam (“Maturing into Gerotranscendence”) shares his theory and research on its origin, research basis, core content, practical application, and examples of aha-experiences. He found the need for self transcendence to be developmental and intrinsic in nature and to be most expressed in the later years.

Harry “Rick” Moody (“Dreams and the Coming of Age”) tells us that our dream life and especially our dreams about aging can offer us compelling clues about what “conscious aging” might promise in terms of giving direction for a more positive vision of life’s second half. His dream themes include elder ego and ideal, creative aging, integrity vs. despair, and journeying into old age.

Christel and David Lukoff describe how stories can provide spiritual care during the dying time. “When it is no longer possible for a dying person to share their own life stories [life review], traditional folk tales and myths can become an important “medicine” to ease spiritual pain at the end of life.”

In their article “Conscious Aging and Worldview Transformation,” Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, Cassandra Vieten, and Kathleen Erickson-Freeman describe their research and findings at the Institute of Noetic Sciences on using “conscious aging” for transforming world views. Several practices as well as a core competency or skill set and blended-learning curriculum were identified. Implications and applications for such practices and curriculum are discussed.

Ram Dass, author of Be Here Now, Still Here, and Be Love Now, a founder of “The Conscious Aging and Dying Movements” in the 1990’s, and a lifelong seeker of the divine shares his 80 year old perspective on late life spirituality, post stroke yoga, role of guru or teacher for fostering spiritual growth and love, and how old age and spirit go together very nicely.

According to Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi’s model of the life span, each month of the year equals seven years. His book, From Age-ing to Sage-ing was written during the September of his life. Now, in the December of his life, he shares with the reader what he has learned about life and aging since his book. This book is the textbook for the new area of study and practice we are calling transpersonal gerontology. For those interested in their own personal sage-ing, look up the “Sage-ing Guild” for literature and training.

The following scholars are the contributors for our “Recommended Readings” section, myself included. Edmund Sherman speaks both as a lifelong gerontologist and as one of our several octogenarian authors. He recommends books by Bob Atchley, Lars Tornstam, Rick Moody, Erik Erikson, Erick Fromm, Thich Nhat Hanh, Ram Dass, Ken Wilber, Karl Jaspers, Mircea Eliade, and Robert Butler and his own recently published Contemplative Aging. Myrtle Heery shares her favorite Baby Boomer books on conscious aging with
the reader that include such boomer authors as Jean Shinoda Bolen and Angeles Arrien as well as those by the boomer’s spiritual leaders, Ram Dass, David Moberg, and Palden Gyatso, plus her own book, *Awakening to Aging*.

Susan McFadden’s annotated bibliography on the role of spirituality in aging offers the reader a selection of readings that are older, more religious, psychological, Christian, and service centered than the other recommendations. It includes publications by Frankl, Missinne, Houwen, Ramsey and Bliezner, among others.

Do let us know here at the Journal your thoughts and reactions to and your possible contributions for the future of Transpersonal Gerontology.

QW
Harrogate, TN USA
AUTHENTICITY AND PRESENCE: THE
TRANSPERSONAL LEGACY OF JAMES F.T. BUGENTAL

G. Kenneth Bradford, Ph.D.

Born December 25, 1915, James Bugental died peacefully at home on September 18, 2008. Those of us gathering there that day noticed a lightness around his body and something of sweet release in the air. As a founder of Humanistic Psychology and widely recognized as a master Existential Psychotherapist, Jim will be most remembered within the web of his Humanistic affiliations. However, for a significant number of us who are drawn to in-depth existential and spiritual concerns, he will also be revered as a pioneer of transpersonally-vital psychotherapy.

Jim’s transpersonal vitality must be characterized with a lower case “t” and with an emphasis that is determinedly experiential. To the extent that Transpersonal Psychology is a field based in the reference systems of spiritual or psycho-spiritual thought, separate and distinct from those systems of thought considered to be “Existential” or “Humanistic,” neither the leading theoreticians of the field nor Jim himself considered him to be Transpersonal in this formal sense of the capital “T.” Being a secular humanist, Jim rarely drew upon the conceptual systems common to the Transpersonal discourse of his lifetime. I expect he would be more resonant with the recent “participatory” movement in the field that succeeded him (Ferrer, 2002, 2011) insofar as it privileges felt experience over theoretical constructs. While he respected the work of Ken Wilber, for instance, such as the distinctions between pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal, he did not reference this any more than he referenced other abstract theoretical constructions, such as id, ego, and superego, consciousness, personal unconscious, and collective unconscious, or Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. As a practical phenomenologist, Jim privileged the messy complexities of lived experience over the neat orderliness of conceptual schemas. By the same token, even though he identified himself as an Existentialist, the legacy for which he will be most remembered by those who knew him is that of an existentialist with a small “e”: an adept at working with living experience rather than a philosophical authority. Since systems of psychology (or theology, or philosophy, et cetera) tend toward codification of their respective constructs in the process of being formalized (thus sporting that capital letter), their constructs are typically formulated in a nominative vocabulary, which is prone to stasis. So, Transpersonal theory and Existential philosophy are not the same as transpersonal-existential experiencing, which is dynamic and verb-like in its liveliness, always beyond fixed conceptual formulations.
Not only did Jim understand that the map is not the territory, he knew that the territory of living, unfolding experience could *never* be adequately mapped, simply because it refused to sit still. Which is not to say he did not try: he loved conceptual maps and constantly played at creating and clarifying psychological constructs. Nevertheless, he always returned to the elusiveness of actual experience, recognizing that life is an impermanent flow, a mysterious stream which began we know not where, with shifting currents, eddies, whirlpools, and banks that seem to contain it, but which are liable to be breached by life’s inevitable floods and droughts. In the river of life, Jim taught that one can – out of hope or fear - resist the flows and backwaters in which one finds oneself, or – out of courage and mindfulness - open to the “full catastrophe” and full magnificence of existence, and respond to these immensities without hesitation or compulsion.

As Jim taught, to be open and responsive in the world rather than closed and reactive is to be vitally present here and now. To seek to live one’s own life and source oneself from one’s heart’s desire rather than to live someone else’s life, a life one may have been nominated for by one’s parents or society, is to seek, and embody, authenticity (Bugental, 1976, 1980, 1987). To the extent that an impulse for self-realization arises from within rather than being programmed from the outside, the intimately *personal* search for authenticity reveals itself to be exquisitely *transpersonal*, in that one comes to source oneself from beyond the ego and superego. In the flow of mindful experiencing, neat conceptual categories dissolve in the ever-changing tide of non-conceptual presence. It is in these senses that Jim was a transpersonal pioneer of the practice of presence in psychotherapy, a skillful guide for those of us inclined toward seeking our more authentic nature.

As a champion of experientially-rigorous therapy, Bugental emphasized the healing power of moment to moment awareness well before the practice of mindfulness became fashionable in psychology (Walsh, 1976). Concurrently, he emphasized the therapeutic power of intersubjectivity before its adoption by relational psychoanalysis and feminist psychology. As a clinical practice of mindfulness, his understanding of *presence* (1978, 1987) had two aspects. It included the capacity for *receptivity*, allowing for the strengthening of such qualities as sensory awareness, empathic attunement, and intuition. Additionally, it goes beyond mindfulness as simply and calmly paying attention to what is, by including the practice of relational courage in daring to be *expressive* within the therapeutic exchange. During a period in the 1990’s when we co-taught introductory classes in Existential-Humanistic Therapy at the California Institute of Integral Studies, I would mention that there is a striking parallel between his understanding of therapeutic presence having both receptive and expressive dimensions and the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of awakened presence (*bodhi*), which joins the wisdom of empty-openness (*sunyata*) with the compassionate expression of skillful means (*upaya*). Jim appreciated that the conjoint aspects of therapeutic presence he discovered made sense in this higher octave of unconditional presence.
Among the first psychologists to stretch the purpose of psychotherapy to include a search for authenticity (1965), Jim was an exemplar in seeing through the social conditioning and psychological resistances that constrict one’s capacity for being genuinely and fully oneself. Opening to the \textit{being} that one is, the unfolding process underneath the mixed feelings and misshapen ideas of who one takes oneself to be reveals an authentic nature that is thoroughly transpersonal. Following both Heidegger (2001/1987) and the sensibility of developmental psychology, Jim understood that the path of becoming true to oneself proceeded along a continuum. One had to address more gross confusions and self/world estrangements before attending to the more subtle fixations obscuring one’s true nature. While Jim worked primarily on the noisier emotional knots and mental fixations that characterize “psychological work,” he was well aware that the continuum of authenticity stretched to include spiritual realization. As early as 1965, Jim put it like this, “\textit{As one approaches the stage of letting go to the suchness of Being without striving against it, one is attaining to full authenticity}” (p.33).

In the practice of psychotherapy, Bugental was adamant in his sentiment that \textit{we’re not healing illnesses, we’re freeing capacities that have been restricted}. Therapy does not improve one’s authentic nature, but loosens and frees up those inhibitions which impede its spontaneous display. Depending on how severely one’s openness and responsivity has been restricted, the range of potential freedom extends from simply increasing social adaptation (and the sense of belonging that goes with that) all the way to realizing the unconditional, trans-egoic \textit{suchness of being} (\textit{tathata}). In respecting both a developmental continuum and this transpersonal potentiality of human being, he was informed both by American visionaries such as Maslow and Tillich, and European philosophers such as Heidegger and Buber.

In 2005, the Association of Transpersonal Psychology, in conjunction with the School of Holistic Studies at John F. Kennedy University, honored Bugental with a \textbf{Pioneer of Transpersonal Psychology} award. This award, supplementing a 1991 Pathfinder Award from the Association of Humanistic Psychology, recognized the practical and inspirational transpersonal leadership Jim exercised for holistically-oriented and presence-centered psychotherapists. Organized by ATP Board member and JFKU chair of Transpersonal Psychology, Ray Greenleaf, the occasion of the Pioneer Award was a day devoted to presentations by former students of Jim who were now senior faculty and esteemed clinicians in the community. That this honor was bestowed while Jim was still alive and in attendance was a joy for us all.

Among the presentations given that day, the Chair of the first accredited Transpersonal Psychology Program in the world (starting at JFKU in 1979), Bryan Wittine, a Jungian analyst, spoke of how his individual therapy and subsequent professional training with Jim proved to be the most important education he received in what has been a highly educated and distinguished career (Wittine, 2005). Molly Sterling, a much loved Bay Area therapist and partner in the James F. T. Bugental Corporation, spoke of having one foot in the existential and one foot in the transpersonal world in her practice of
psychotherapy (Bradford & Sterling, 2009). Kirk Schneider spoke of how his recent work on awe (Schneider, 2004, 2009) expresses a depth spirituality emerging directly out of Jim’s experience-near approach. Cheryl Krauter addressed how the essence of Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy as practiced by Jim is the ground within which her Transpersonal therapy practice is rooted. I spoke to the integrative Contemplative-Existential Psychotherapy courses I have taught for over twenty years, which are based on Jim’s work and informed by Existential philosophy intertwined with Buddhist thought and contemplative practice (Bradford, 2007).

Jim’s dedication to the trans-egoic exploration of life was fierce. Perhaps his transpersonal sensibility is best expressed in the following passage from *Psychotherapy and Process* (1976), which remains to this day a classic introductory text on experience-near therapy. As he put it,

*To me, God is a word used to point to our ineffable subjectivity, to the unimaginable potential which lies within each of us, to the aspirations which well up within us for the greater truth and vividness of living, to our compassion for the tragedy of the human condition, to our pride in the undestroyed but endlessly assaulted dignity of our being and to something more. To the sense of mystery within which we always live if we are truly aware and to the dedication to explore that mystery which is the very essence of being human.* (p.139)

Following Jim, the search for authenticity challenges us to live the paradox of taking a firm stand - in all seriousness and sobriety - within the life we find ourselves living, and to let go of clinging to any particular stand – with all levity and willingness to be drunk on life - letting flow the unending, never beginning, always changing river which carries us along into greater and greater awe, awareness, and compassion for self and other.

Jim Bugental.
Photo: Nader Shabahangi
References


The Author

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James F.T. Bugental, Ph.D., A.B.P.P., died age 92, September 18, 2008. He left a full bodied legacy for psychology. Some of his professional accomplishments include former professor of psychology at the University of California at Los Angeles, Georgia Tech University, and Saybrook; Emeritus Clinical Faculty at Stanford University School of Medicine; Rockefeller Scholar at the California Institute of Integral Studies; professor emeritus of the international Institute for Humanistic Studies; first President of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, Division 32 of American Psychological Association; first recipient of Rollo May Award, given by Division 32, Humanistic Psychology; honored as a pioneer in humanistic/transpersonal psychology by the Association for Transpersonal Psychology in 2005; author of over 60 articles and chapters on Existential-Humanistic psychology and psychotherapy; author of five books: Search for Authenticity, Psychotherapy and Process, Intimate Journeys, Psychotherapy Isn’t What You Think, The Art of Psychotherapy and editor of two versions of the Handbook of Humanistic Psychology. His books have been translated into many languages and all continue to be used widely in undergraduate and graduate schools of psychology and psychotherapy.

In this issue devoted to Transpersonal Gerontology, I am honored to share Jim as I experienced him close to thirty years as his student, colleague and friend. He was my teacher and mentor as he was for countless students and colleagues who each in their unique voices continue to expand his love for truth, for knowing and not knowing, for searching and for being present to the actual moment. He yearned for something more for himself, his family which he so dearly loved, students, colleagues, and all of humanity. This yearning was ever present when I would call him on the phone. Opera or classical music could easily be heard in the background when he picked up his phone, “Hi, just a minute, let me turn the music down.” There was outer music which he dearly loved but the “music behind the words” was his passion. His presence to the hidden potential inside me is what these calls and in person consultations were about for me and for countless others whose lives he profoundly touched.

The first time I met Jim was in his very small office in Santa Rosa, CA in the early 1980s. I had no idea who this man was but totally trusted my friend and colleague, Ann Dreyfus, saying he was “the best.” He was very willing to meet with me when I told him I had not read anything he had written. Of course I remembered his name from textbooks in relation to existential-humanistic
psychology but at that point in my career I was more interested in how far I had to drive for another leg of supervision. Santa Rosa was close. We met and I promised not to read anything he had written for one year while he supervised my cases. He wanted to train someone to follow the subjective life of the client without the use of theory. I liked this idea of not reading very much and was full of curiosity how Jim would follow the client’s subjective world.

He asked if I had any questions toward the end of the interview. I had been drawn to a photo behind him of a man with a wonderful smile. So I went for what was “real” for me, which I quickly learned was of great value to Jim.

“Yes, who is the man in the picture?” Jim reached back to the photo, picked it up, and tears began to moisten his cheeks.

“This is Al Lasko, my best friend. He died recently.” Jim looked up from the photo and looked into my eyes with a presence rich with the truth of what truly matters in being: human - human relationships. I was experiencing authenticity in the moment. This is how he followed everyone’s subjective world. He lived it fully with vulnerability and honesty.

Jim taught me through tears, humor, storytelling, silence, intellectual discussions, disagreements, writings, walks, lunches and any opportunity he could take to question, to explore, to follow his insatiable curiosity of the subjective world in the actual moment. Case consultation was not “about” the client but rather the lived moment of consultation. Essential to my consultations was what happened inside of me when I brought the client into discussion. For example, Jim invited me to pace in his office as I shared that my client often paced during sessions. This client had been labeled schizophrenic for many years. As I paced in Jim’s office I felt the isolation and fear of this label and tears streamed down my face. Words were not needed. I returned to seeing this client with a depth of presence to his pain that would be what Jim called my “pou sto” for our long work together. Pou sto, a Greek term meaning a place to stand, in psychotherapy is a steady inner stand with the client while exploring the struggles of being human.

This experience of walking in another’s shoes happened in so many different forms with Jim. After group consultations we would often go to lunch. Jim liked a certain restaurant with a waitress he nicknamed “giggle box.” She had an infectious laugh and no matter how many struggles we had listened to that morning in consultation, listening to giggle box was just as important to Jim and all of us. Balance was always important.

In his later years he lost a lot of his memory and took his loss as an opportunity to live fully what he had valued so deeply all of his life - the actual moment. His later years were mostly spent with his amazing wife, Elizabeth, enjoying the beautiful blue herring in their backyard, softly stroking his beloved cat and sharing so many other amazing moments of love and joy.

I struck a deal with Jim toward the end of his life. If there was a life after death he would send me a message I could not mistaken. About a week after he died I
was waiting in my office for a client and a picture fell off my office wall and landed at my feet. It was a poster from an International Transpersonal conference, with the words “Individual Choice and Universal Responsibility.” I found tears welling up. I was not sure but it seemed to be the promised message. Being a stubborn student, I had to get one more message. Later that day there was a letter in my mailbox from a local mortuary with the following message:

“You too will die one day! Today and only today you can purchase your cremation for 50% off.”

Ok, I got it. These words reminded me of one of Jim’s frequent phrases, “pointing with your elbow,” which Jim used to emphasize the necessity yet limitation of words in attempting to describe one’s subjective experience. Thank you Jim for gently and humorously “pointing with your elbow” to the truth. Jim’s teachings are alive in me and I dearly miss calling him to hear, “Hi, just a minute, let me turn the music down.”

The Author

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ABSTRACT: In 1990 and again in 1994 the author called for a new field, “transpersonal gerontology,” that would integrate transpersonal psychology and gerontology and would “include such topics as personal and ultimate meaning and purpose for late-life existence, late life spirituality, life after death, spirituality and life span development, spiritual autobiography, wisdom and compassion, and the Elder-Child” (1994, p. 98). In the fifteen plus years since the publication, the need to further define and develop transpersonal gerontology has accelerated, given the continuing and even growing lack of meaning and purpose of the later years, especially in terms of positive, growth oriented, and spiritual models and the Baby Boomers beginning to reach retirement age. This article addresses elements, applications, and practices of and possibilities for late life spirituality to establish a knowledge, research, program and practice base for transpersonal gerontology predicated on the premise that our later adult years provide special and ideal conditions for such psycho-spiritual development.

The Baby Boomers’ (1946–64) huge numbers will challenge most every institution in this country as well as those in many countries around the world, and transform aging and old age beyond anything known up to this point in human and world history. Given the composition and experience of this cohort, their lived experience will take unforeseeable and unimaginable expressions throughout the next 30 years. Generally speaking, the current elderly are living somewhat marginal lives limited by their and societies’ expectations. The Baby Boomer generation is beginning its odyssey into the retirement years and this group, more than any preceding group, has the freedom and means to expect more of their later years. The current post retirees are asking and even demanding much more of their retirement period that may span 20 or more years and encompass one fourth of their lives. It is hard to imagine one fourth of life as being marginalized especially during the period, unlike childhood/adolescence, when we finally know who we are, what is really important, how we can contribute, and maybe even how life works and why we are here. So what is possible in and for the later years beyond what has previously passed for being enough or all that could be expected?

This article provides an overview of what can be possible from a psycho-spiritual perspective in the later years, serves as the lead article for this special issue of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology on the new and emerging area or field of transpersonal gerontology and provides the reader as well as current and future elders, researchers and service providers with an introduction to what could be possible for the last fourth of our lives.
For some, perhaps for many readers, a psycho-spiritual transpersonal perspective is familiar but its applications and practices for the later years may be new. In this article, the knowledge base and practices of transpersonal psychology are taken into the last fourth of life, in the forms of elements, applications and practices available or possible. A subsequent section of this article addresses the many possibilities for the future in terms of research, publications, instruction, programs, services, experiences and visions.

In so doing, it is hoped that the reader will (a) gain a greater personal and professional understanding of the many expressions of spirituality in the later years; (b) realize the potentials of new program and research possibilities in late life spirituality, (c) contribute to the development of this new area of study and practice, and (d) recognize how the later years provide conditions and opportunities ideal for spiritual practice and as a spiritual path. This new field is predicated on the premise that these years are the most spiritual years of the lifecycle and offer special and even necessary conditions for expressing our spiritual selves, natures, and essences.

Carl Jung (1933), possibly the voice for the potentials for life’s second half, spoke of a religious outlook going beyond religion as the essential problem encountered in his patient’s second half of life. Moody (1976) proposed four model patterns or stages for treatment and regards for older people: first, rejection, second, social services, third, participation, and fourth, self actualization and transcendence. Much has been previously published on the first and second, less on the third, and very little on the fourth. This article and special issue will address in detail the much needed literature for late life spirituality.

What is this religious outlook recognized and advocated by Jung, Moody, and others for the second half of life? How and why is it missing in the lives of older adults and what might its recovery add to the experience and meaning of the later years? These are especially relevant questions and concerns, given that “old age in the modern world has no distinctive or positive features. It is either an invisible void in one’s psychological life-space or it is to be filled up with activities in common with previous roles and responsibilities” (Moody, 1976, p. 9).

Yet, Moberg (1990) suggested “Among all domains for change in human lives, the one that provides the most opportunity for continuing growth in the later years is the spiritual” (p.9). Jones (1984) characterized aging as a spiritualizing process. For some this process is realized through various forms of self transcendence. Brown (1980) echoed this proposition, “Old age...has its own distinct religious needs [and]...can be seen as centered in the individual’s struggle to experience self transcendence” (p. 80–81). Tornstam (2005), for whom this need is developmental and intrinsic in nature, gave it the name “gerotranscendence.” Older adults are predisposed to consider the cosmic (transcendent) dimension of life. Jung’s individuation or integration of opposites, including youth and elder, leads to the development of a spiritual need for wholeness. Heard’s (1963) evolutionary model advocated a ”second
maturity” possible with the additional life spans of today and necessary for growing beyond the “first maturity” of ego development, career and parenting, wherein one addresses such possibilities as developing extended consciousness and going beyond one’s individuality. Finally, Atchley (1997) found the contemplative mystical experience as part of an “everyday mysticism” in later adulthood.

For many, lifelong personal religious faith seems to be sufficient to meet spiritual needs and certainly must be acknowledged as an important dimension of late life spirituality. Many other older adults, however, are moving away from organized religion and participating in a consciousness discipline and with various techniques and practices such as meditation and yoga. This consciousness based spirituality includes and goes beyond institutional religion, supporting Brown’s (1980) contention that “The basic purpose of religion is to help a person to look beyond self, to have some view, experience, or realization of transcendence” (p. 77), which is beyond all concepts. However, religion is failing many of its followers in this basic purpose. Jung cautioned that one has to go beyond the words and images to the experience, otherwise “religion is a defense against the experience of God” (Campbell, 1988, p. 209).

It could rightly be stated that spirituality means something different to every person, so what is meant by religiosity and spirituality? Religiosity and religion speak to religious affiliations, doctrine, dogma, beliefs and faith and the relationships followers have to each, whereas spirituality typically addresses the experiential relationship one has with God, spirit, higher power or self or the Oneness with/as the I AM. In this article, spirituality will describe the quest or experience involving both transcendence (the experience of reality beyond body-mind) and immanence (the experience of the transcendent in the body-mind or self) which could unfold either within or outside organized religion. Finally, it is important to mention that such discussion and understanding should distinguish between a state of consciousness and a stage of consciousness. A state of consciousness is temporary while a stage of consciousness is developmental and enduring. Experiencing states do often catalyze such stage development.

Atchley and Barusch (2004) reported that considerable evidence from longitudinal studies suggested that spiritual concerns, development, and experiences become more important to adults as they age. Older adults are more likely to see themselves as more spiritually committed, more engaged in spiritual practices, more likely to have subsequent spiritual experiences, and more likely to serve others as a result of their experiences (Atchley, 2009). Robert Atchley’s article “How Spiritual Experience and Development Interact with Aging” in this issue highlights his longitudinal research on late life spirituality and a transpersonal gerontology. Earlier Lars Tornstam (1994) found that “the gero-transcendent individual experiences a new feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, a redefinition of time, space, life, and death, and a redefinition of the self” (p. 204). Tornstam’s article
“Maturing into Gerotranscendence,” in this issue, addresses and expands upon his early and revolutionary theory of gerotranscendence.

Wuthnow (1998) found that our study of aging has shifted from a religious oriented or centered “spirituality of dwelling” with the context rooted in scripture and ritual to one that was more personal centered with the context centered in journeying and negotiation or a “spirituality of seeking.” For most it is a combination of and balance between the two expressions. He goes on to describe a more recent third trend, namely that of an emerging “practice-oriented spirituality” wherein we grow spirituality by and through our on-going practices, such as described later in this article, until they become us. Zinnbauer (1997) maintained that, in recent years, many in the baby boom generation chose to search for personal and transpersonal meaning outside of organized religion; instead, finding it in Jungian psychology, Eastern practices, etc.

This premises of this article – that the later years are a time when spiritual needs can become more important and vital and can deepen and expand to include the transpersonal and transcendental – seem valid for several reasons. First, many if not most of the late life developmental tasks involve concerns such as loss, letting go, life review, and acceptance that may best be understood and addressed from a spiritual perspective. Second, the major world religions generally speak of the later years as the time for deepening one’s experience of the spiritual and for serving as a spiritual teacher or guide. Third, the developmental theories of Jung (1933), Erikson (1980), and Peck (1968) characterized old age in largely spiritual terms such as transcendence and wisdom. Fourth, many older adults express a need to somehow address questions and search for answers of an existential and spiritual nature perhaps in the form of a life review and as a process of ego integration or transcendence (Wacks, 1987). Fifth, Joan Erikson (1997) cited a ninth stage of development that can occur in old age as spirituality increases from middle age to a transcendent spiritual perspective in later old age mainly over 70.

It probably should also be mentioned that the Boomer cohort (1946–64), currently entering the second half of life, some of whom are retiring as well, is the largest such cohort in the history of the world and includes the generation that brought “consciousness raising” to the world. Dychtwald (1999) calls this cohort “The Age Wave” and maintains that “Boomers have radically transformed every stage of life that they have experienced. As these Boomers grow older, ‘age power’ will rule the 21st century, and in many critical ways, society is woefully unprepared. Research indicates that Boomers will not grow old gracefully” (p. 9). More will be said about the future possibilities from and for this cohort in a later section.

According to Wink and Dillon (2002), there are two broad models for spiritual growth in late life. The first sees spiritual growth as the positive outcome of the maturational process and supports this view with the work of Carl Jung and with the post-formal stages of cognitive development being conductive to spiritual questing. The second sees spiritual growth as the overcoming or
response to the constraints and adversity faced during the later years. Moreover such models would include the impact of social and personal contexts, namely one’s response to the more frequent transitions in late adulthood as well as personality traits such as autonomy, openness to experience, cognitive interest and even development, i.e., spiritual intelligence.

Before examining the possible elements, applications and practices of a “transpersonal gerontology” a definition of terms seems warranted. The term “gerontology” means the study of aging and old age. Transpersonal psychology’s primary aim is to better understand and experience the part of the person that lies beyond personality, individuality, ego, acculturation, and socially consensual reality or beliefs; that incorporates the totality of the whole person – mind, body, soul and spirit; and that includes what Maslow (1971) referred to as the need for self transcendence. Transpersonal also names the third and highest tier of Wilber’s (2006a) integral model of development. The work of Michael Washburn, Jenny Wade, Jorge Ferrer, and Susanne Cook-Greuter could be mentioned here as well. The transpersonal also includes what has historically been called the “mystical experience” whether considered as a state or stage of consciousness. That said, the personal is also part of the trans “personal,” making it a “psycho-spiritual” model of growth and development. In short it both includes and transcends our “biopsychosocial” selves.

Accordingly, this article addresses the greater, higher or deeper aspect of our souls or spiritual essence as we age, based on the premises that our later adult years provide special conditions for the realization of this need or calling to go beyond our “selves” as we mature into our spirituality.

**Elements of Transpersonal Gerontology**

Use of the term transpersonal gerontology and the related term gerotranscendence were first used in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. Previous descriptions or elements of late life spirituality have been described in the literature. These include the realization of the unity of all experiences; detachment of letting go; living reflectively in order to find and learn from the meaning of daily experience; seeing and accepting what is; acceptance of and learning from loss; finding an appropriate balance between being human and seeking the at-one-ment with God; self-determined wisdom; self-transcendence; meaning in aging; and accepting the totality of life (Blazer, 1991; Howe, 1983; Jones, 1984).

Although each of the above could be included in this discussion, only the following four elements will be addressed. They were chosen for their prevalence in the literature and for journal space limitations. Future authors are encouraged to expand upon the elements (as well as applications and practices) of transpersonal gerontology: (a) spiritualizing diminishments, (b) detachment and non-attachment versus disengagement, (c) equanimity and presence, (d) wisdom and compassion. Each can be experienced in the ongoing lives of many older adults and each is found in the principles and practices of transpersonal psychology and in the world’s major religions. It is
acknowledged that there is much overlap between the dimensions, other terms could name these elements as well, other elements are certainly possible and equally valid, and these elements could describe spirituality throughout life, especially in response to transition or crisis. The intention is not exclusivity; rather, the reader is invited to join in this consideration of possible expressions of our highest natures during our later years. Moreover, the guiding question of such a consideration is offered: “How can we work together to bring about an expanded consciousness for these years”? This expanded consciousness can be described in many ways – such as a sense of the sacred, greater meaning making capacity, expanded role and practice of spirituality, greater awareness of something more or greater than self, etc. This potential and realization of such an expanded consciousness in the later years will be called “transpersonal gerontology.” All authors in this special issue of the Journal contribute their perspectives and experiences of transpersonal gerontology.

**Spiritualizing Diminishments**

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), of all our possible virtues, no trait is more useful, more essential for survival and for improving our quality of life than our ability to transform adversity into an enjoyable challenge. This virtue or skill is learned throughout life but finds no greater opportunity to be practiced or even developed than in late life. In *Winter Grace*, Fischer (1985) defined such grace of late life as “courage grown larger in the face of diminishments… capacity to affirm life in the face of death…and sense of human possibility in the midst of limitation” (p. 5). “A spirituality of aging must help us find a way to turn losses into gains and to learn how the stripping process which often accompanies aging can be a gradual entrance into freedom and new life” (p. 4). Bianchi (1986) called Teilhard de Chardin’s “mysticism of diminishments,” a “spirituality for elderhood” (p. 184).

“By becoming an ascetic, the Hindu elder approximates the process of loss which makes up old age and spiritualizes them. His natural diminishment is freely transformed into spiritual insight. As a result, the signs of old age are not marks of a slow decline but the starting point for a new life-task” (Callahan & Christiansen, 1974, p. 10). Diminishments are nature’s way of turning us away from previous priorities to a more complete and perhaps ultimate experience of ourselves. The elder turned sage uses old age diminishments as spiritual curriculum that evokes full humanhood and schools us in the art of humility and self-acceptance. Diminishments force surrender of pride and acceptance of human limitations thus making us more open and childlike (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995). Suffering through diminishments removes our veil of deception and shocks us into the truth of ourselves and of life (Bianchi, 1986). Such a transcendence of diminishments requires facing the challenges of age and results in a heightened sense of humility and truth. Psychosynthesis speaks of the “blessing of obstacles” which serve the function of drawing out latent will and of developing transpersonal qualities (Gelbond, 1985). Later in this article as well as in his own article, “Content to Be,” Ram Dass speaks to the diminishments involved in living daily with the long term effects of his stroke.
There are two ways that the elderly can grow through diminishments (Bianchi, 1986). First, egoism is purged away and sacrificed through the sufferings of old age. Second, as a wounded healer, our losses can be teachers of empathy and understanding. Whitehead (1981), who considered coming to terms with the changes and losses of aging a key challenge of the aging process, suggested that “the deprivations and losses of advancing old age are opportunities to divest one’s self of the illusionary ambitions and false securities of life which often serve as distractions from the life of the spirit” (p. 50). Rarely are such losses seen as the despair and challenge needed for the development of ego integrity, wisdom, compassion and spiritual development. Not all such deprivations come with old age for some arrive much earlier in life in the form of chronic illnesses and pain. For an understanding of the interfacing of a long term spiritual practice with a very chronic illness (REDD), see Ken Wilber’s blogs of 2002/2006.

**Detachment and Non-attachment vs. Disengagement**

Several of the gerontological theories of successful aging evolved as a response to early disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961) that dictated a natural, inevitable and mutual disengagement or withdrawal between the elder and previous societal roles. Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin (1968) found a shift toward interiority and from active to passive mastery in the second half of life. Within a transpersonal gerontology framework, late life disengagement is reframed as a spiritual practice of detachment or non-attachment. The goal of late life then is not disengagement but rather detachment from or non-attachment to previous roles as exclusive sources of worth or identity. Peck (1968) called this transcendence of work, body, and self. Jung (1955/1970) described the major task of late life as “individuation,” the disengagement of the transcendent or higher Self from the persona/mask of living through one’s roles in society. Tornstam (1994) made this element an integral part of his theory of gero-transcendence.

Groeschel (1984) described the spiritual seeker in late life as gaining freedom in detachment. Detachment comes from letting go of previous self-images and ego attachments, daring to grow through the unknown (dark night of Christian mysticism) and accepting the gifts of the spirit. This detachment is found in the Christian theology of Meister Eckhart. The major religions teach that life is an ordeal through which the person struggles with attachment and bondage to desire, fear, and ego. The contemplative traditions can enable us to revision retirement and aging as a “natural monastery” where earlier attachments roles, etc. are naturally stripped from us and we gain many gifts (Moody, 1988). Later, Moody (1997) found a new validation of disengagement through the practice of non-attachment. This non-attachment has been a common teaching in the world’s various mystical traditions. In a study of successful aging, Wacks (1990) found themes of letting go of attachments, of conditions for happiness and satisfaction and of definitions of ego or self-identity.

Zen Master Dogen wrote “To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by
myriad things” (cited in Moon, 2010, p. 7). What is meant by forgetting the self? He is talking about our forgetting self-concern, for it is all about letting go. We can forget about accomplishing all of our ambitions—it is too late for that. Sometimes for a brief moment, we “taste the relief of letting this self fold gently into the next self, moment by moment, like eggs into batter” (Moon, 2010, p. 7). Many elders would possibly say that we are regularly forced to let go of one thing after another.

Coping with suffering is part of the agenda of detachment. According to Gurdjieff (Ouspensky, 1949), “A man must die, that is, he must free himself from a thousand petty attachments and identifications…He is attached to everything in his life, attached to his imagination, attached to his stupidity, attached even to his sufferings, possibly to his sufferings more than to anything else” (p. 218). Levine (1979, 1984) defined suffering as resistance to what is or wanting things to be otherwise and maintained that the letting go of our suffering is the most difficult work we will ever do. Attachment and identification create a bondage to its object and limits what is possible. The later years generally provide ample opportunity to study with the teachers of attachment, identification and suffering.

Possible lessons taught by suffering can include: (a) through personal suffering lies the possibility of redemption, (b) wounding and suffering provide preparation and training for the healer and teacher, (c) suffering indicates, through attachment and need for control, where growth is needed, (d) suffering, as letting go, opens one to the present or Eternal Now and to see beyond illusions and assumptions, (e) through suffering life’s trials, crosses, and hero’s journey, consciousness is transformed, (f) one can affirm suffering as the shaper and teacher of life, (g) suffering evokes and teaches compassion (Campbell, 1988; Houston, 1987). Adversity can become a crucible for redefining the human spirit.

Equanimity and Presence

According to Fischer (1985), “Many older people achieve an attitude that has long been the goal of various religious traditions: a sense of the immediacy of life and a new ability to live in the present moment” (p.19). A spirituality of the later years involves the increased capacity to flow in the moment, to become lost in an experience beyond time and place and, as a consequence, to achieve transcendence. This ability to flow is a dimension of the optimal psychological experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Myerhoff (1980) found the capacity to live every aspect of life fully was a secret of aging well. Moreover, Campbell (1988) maintained that the experience of eternity, here and now, in each moment, is the function of life and perhaps a dimension of soul making as well.

Throughout life, conformity and commitment forms the very fabric of functioning in society. But the elderly can gain freedom to “be” after all the hampering commitments have passed (Staude, 1981). With this freedom the person can choose to continue as before, to retreat, or to seize the opportunity to see into the nature of existence and the spiritual. Yet, we are faced with our paradoxical natures of craving both novelty of the new and security and
comfort of the old and familiar. According to Van Kaam (1979), de-idolization is the primary task of the second half of life—the transcendence of the idols of one’s past in order to open up to more authentic truths. Through maturity, the aging person can come to a greater acceptance of who one is and how life should be lived. Kornfield (1993) maintained that spiritual life consisted practically entirely of self-acceptance. We must both accept self and transcend self. When we accept ourselves, we can accept most anything else.

Many have spoken to and advocated this element of spiritual practice and its attainment: Welwood (1992) stated, “Cultivating the capacity to be fully present – awake, attentive, and responsive – in all the different circles of life is the essence of spiritual practice and realization” (p. xv). “Our daily life is unsatisfactory only because we are not living it fully because instead we are pursuing a happiness that is always somewhere else, other than where we are right now” (p. xiv). This is using daily life as spiritual practice. Maslow (1971) said it well: “The great lesson from the true mystics...that the sacred is in the ordinary, that it is to be found in one’s daily life...and that to travel may be a flight from confronting the sacred – this lesson can be easily lost” (p. 348–349).

Fischer (1985) noted that, “In the later years we are asked to value being over having but life has not trained us well for being,” and asked: “How can we use our time to develop the interiority which is a special gift of aging?” (p. 24). Bianchi (1986) recommended the cultivation of a contemplative or meditative life in elderhood to prepare for old age, to enhance one’s contributions, and to help the person deal with the diminishments of age.

Roberts (1982) described her loss of self and ego. While sharing her story with an eighty-five year old friend, the elder responded, “What you are talking about is the aging process. It is a change in consciousness that is reserved for the final years” (p.194). Roberts concluded, “This journey is the final process of our life span, wherein self-consciousness is gradually relinquished as we come upon ‘that’ which lied beyond the self” (p. 196). That which lies beyond as final process is the transpersonal or transcendent.

Wisdom and Compassion

Perhaps as no other concept, wisdom links old age and spirituality in our common ethos. “…to envision a curriculum for aging with wisdom as its highest calling, and use it as a means of enlightenment” (Ram Dass, 2000, p. 20). Erikson (1980) made the attainment of integrity and wisdom the final task of his structure of life span development. Later, in his own old age, he changed his understanding of wisdom to that of integrity and despair coexisting and that integrity balances despair and despair tempers integrity. Wisdom thus includes and transcends both integrity and despair (Atchley, 2009; Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick, 1986).

Various definitions and descriptions of wisdom reflect its existential and transpersonal nature and function. Clayton (1982) described wisdom as the
ability to fully grasp human nature in all its complexity. Wisdom speaks to a timeless knowledge of a universal nature and identity. It is seeing and living through illusions about life. Neither accumulation of information nor the refinement of theoretical knowledge will ever suffice in understanding self or life, the purpose(s) of wisdom (Moody, 1986). Self-knowledge is the key to wisdom. Chinen (1985) proposed a new image of maturity that centered around wisdom, self-knowledge, and transcendence.

Wisdom is also both product and producer of self transcendence, the essential form of late life spirituality considered in this article. Orwell and Perlmuter (1990) stated that self transcendence is an essential component of wisdom. Birren and Fisher (1990) found that wisdom comes as a dialectic that is bound both by the transcendence of limit and by its acceptance. The wise person, in short, knows what can be controlled or changed and what cannot, thus allowing for a non-attachment to, transcendence of, and flow with conditions of living and late life. Moody (1986) seemed to be speaking for the Hindu elder who spiritualized old age and, for the existentialist who looked for meaning in suffering: “…Wisdom alone retains the strength to offset the inevitable losses of old age without retreat to narcissism or despair” (p. 18). “Wisdom does not prevent suffering but allows us to find meaning in it” (p. 31). Harry “Rick” Moody’s article “Dreams and The Coming of Age” in this issue takes a serious look at our nightly dreams and what they tells us about spiritual themes related to aging and old age.

Yet wisdom without compassion is typically seen as being incomplete and unbalanced, perhaps even impossible as they may be two sides of the same coin. Compassion comes from the clear understanding afforded by wisdom. To be compassionate means to choose to suffer with the conditions of living both for oneself and for others. Compassion is one way our life long suffering can be sources of redemption for others. We understand others’ trying circumstances through our own such experiences. Merton (1978) proclaimed, “There is no wilderness so terrible, so beautiful, so arid and fruitful as the wilderness of compassion” (p. 114). Compassion strips us of all our false differences so that we may know all as children of the same God.

Moreover, according to Kollar (1985), elder spirituality is characterized by both care and wisdom. The Psalmist (90: 12) in the Holy Bible King James version (1953) counsels, “So teach us to number our days, so we may get us a heart of wisdom” (p. 542). Swedenborg maintained that the attainment of wisdom, compassion and usefulness was the purpose for existence both in this life and in the afterlife (Synnestvedt, 1977). More recently, American Zen Master Genpo Merzel (2007) spoke to the integration of “Big Mind” (wisdom and being) and “Big Heart” (compassion and action) as the highest realization of Spirit.

APPLICATIONS OF TRANSPERSONAL GERONTOLOGY

Several applications will be considered: spiritual eldering; conscious living, aging and dying; soul making; and dementia and stroke as spiritual practice and path.
Spiritual Eldering

The sage or wise elder has been a part of our communities for as long as recorded history yet the conditions of today provide fewer roles and functions for such a figure to play. These sages, whether before or now, manifest wisdom and a strong spiritual connection when confronted by life’s trials (Atchley, 2008). According to Wilber (2000), the highest level of consciousness can be described as a “sagely region” which includes several levels: subtle, causal and ultimate. Atchley (2009) described sages as being either “actualized sages” and/or “transcendent sages” with the actualized sages sharing many characteristics of the subtle level and the transcendent sages operating on the causal and ultimate levels of functioning. “Sage-ing” speaks to the deep need for personal and spiritual growth and expanded consciousness in the later years. Schachter-Shalomi and Miller (1995) maintained that “spiritual eldering” provides both a conceptual model and necessary tools for an urgently needed transvaluation of aging in our western technological society.

In “From Age-ing to Sage-ing,” Schachter-Shalomi and Miller (1995) described spiritual eldering by four tasks: developing contemplative skills, harvesting one’s life, leaving a legacy for the future, and preparing for death. The authors pointed out that conventional religion emphasizes social belonging, religious identity, and security against the unknown. In contrast, the tasks of eldering require that the elder-in-training reduce the ego, open to the spirit, work on self, face the anxiety of the unknown, and live the truth. They further maintained that many current religions do not provide the meditative disciplines that allow intuitive insight and the spiritual eldering process to emerge. Without access to intuitive insight or knowing, religious followers cling to the “brand names” of their religions rather than accessing the generic core of shared transformative practices (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995). Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s article “The December Years of Life” in this issue speaks to his December years (mid-eighties) and how it has changed since his early sixties when he wrote his book.

Perhaps Jung (1933) said it best: “A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a fitful appendage to life’s morning...who must pay for it with damage to his soul” (p.109). As we do not have colleges for middle and late life, we enter the journey into Jung’s afternoon and evening of life wholly unprepared (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995). This article, and the transpersonal gerontology movement in general, is both asking and answering the question, “How may we begin to prepare?” Jung seems to be saying that we must prepare for future ways of being throughout life. Heard’s (1963) “second maturity” also addresses this challenge for the later years, the years for which we have prepared throughout our lives. By use of the elder archetype, the inner elder, we may be shown our lives from the perspective of eternity (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995).
Conscious Living, Aging, and Dying

Two movements, the “Conscious Aging Movement” and the “Conscious Dying Movement” both came into being some years ago and each offers much to elders and to transpersonal gerontology. Using aging and old age to provide ideal and perhaps necessary conditions for spiritual practice and growth is demonstrated in the “conscious aging” movement. It is a spiritual process that uses practices common to the wisdom traditions and transpersonal psychology to become more deeply conscious than is usually considered possible in the earlier years. Moreover, conscious aging achieves positive growth by embracing and using negative life events, not repressing them. Conscious aging means to integrate divergent elements of the self as a process that Jung called “individuation” that includes increasing awareness and living consciously in later life. This is very different from adaptation, successful aging, productive aging or essentially trying to stay middle aged; rather, conscious aging conveys the stances recommended by the mystical traditions and spiritual paths of the East (Moody, 2010) and the practices cited in this article under “Practices of Transpersonal Gerontology.”

Ram Dass (1992), in speaking of aging as being in time, encouraged the spiritual seeker to use aging to go behind time, to find that part that is not in time and rest in it. In so doing the person will see the stuff of life and aging as the necessary work for one’s spiritual journey of finding that which does not change. Perhaps Ram Dass spoke for many of us who are moving towards or into our later years when he wondered, “I began to seriously question where my ideas about aging had come from, why being old felt like such a stigma, and whether or not I could transform this process, with all the fears, losses, and uncertainties that came with it from a necessary evil into an opportunity for spiritual and emotional growth” (p.121). He further stated that “the images of old age common to our culture are designed to make us feel that aging is a kind of failure, that somehow God made a big mistake” (p. 121).

For many, nearness to death, regardless of age, can serve as a stimulus to reorder priorities, to transform one’s perception of life and its purpose, to heal the spirit, and to knowledge of God. “This process of healing, through repeatedly suffering the pain of death is a spiritual process” (Doka & Morgan, 1993, p. 167). The metaphor of death as a teacher and liberator can be found in all the major spiritual traditions of humankind (Metzer, 1986). Such learning ordinarily takes the form of dealing with one’s own death usually during old age or when terminally ill or through a spiritual practice such as “consciously dying.” According to Levine (1982), to let go of the previous moment and to open to the next moment is to die consciously. The same instructions for preparing or practicing for dying apply to living consciously, as each requires surrendering into the next moment.

In the Eastern religions this process and task is called ego death. In Christian mysticism it is called mortification. The practice of mortification is strongly advocated in the canonical writings of practically all of the major and minor religions of the world. Mortification means the purposeful and deliberate dying of self, including self will, self interest, or any self centered process. Perhaps
Ouspensky (1949), quoting Gurdjieff, said it best: “A man may be born, but in order to be born he must first die, and in order to die he must first awake…When a man awakes he can die; when he dies he can be born” (p. 218). This dying to oneself is taught in the New Testament (Campbell, 1988) and advocates the need for the spiritual pilgrim to move beyond simple belief and faith. Thus ego death requires a death and a resurrection and is the basic motif of the universal hero’s journey (Campbell, 1988). Perhaps certain conditions of the later years provide a hero’s journey as well.

In The Grace in Dying: How We Are Transformed Spiritually as We Are Dying, Singh (2000) spoke to the experience and opportunities of dying consciously. She considered “the nearing death experience” as one of three life experiences that opens us to our true spiritual Self and identity, the others being a lived conscious spiritual path and practice, and the “near death experience” (NDE). The process and conditions of (transformative) dying can open us to realizing Unity Consciousness and our reemergence into the Ground of Being. We do this through completing the stages of psychological adjustment to loss of self (mental ego) vis-à-vis Kubler-Ross (1969); by moving through the acceptance stage into the deeper spiritual process(s) of chaos; by surrendering the first and second dualities of time and space, vis-à-vis Wilber (1977) and by transcending all dualities and reemerging back into the non-dual Ground of Being, our Original Nature. The path to the transpersonal realms by way of long term spiritual practice appears as the same path each of us will follow in our dying process. For information on another form of the nearing death experience, see Final Gifts (Callanan & Kelly, 1992).

Soul Making

“Call the world, if you please, the vale of soul making, then you will find out the use of the world” (John Keats, 1819, p. 336).

A fuller spirituality of aging should foster soul making, the fullest expansion of the inner potentials of the older adult (Bianchi, 1986). “Souls evolve just as physical bodies do. In fact, according to the wisdom teachings, the very purpose of human existence is the evolution of the soul – the perfecting of the aspect of ourselves that partakes of divinity” (Seifer & Vieweg, 2009, p. 25). Soul making and the “soul” is premised on the existence of something more than our physical selves, our lives, and our/the universe as we know it through traditional scientifically acceptable means of knowing. Going a step further, this process could be recognized as spirit taking form as soul for soul to bring spirit into flesh as part of the larger evolutionary process of the creation of the physical universe and beyond. It is that part of the person that has always been and will always be and the part that has chosen to participate in this classroom of physicality in order to expand the expression of Spirit. As psychotherapist Welwood (2000) describes it, “If soul work involves coming down to earth, working with structure, and coming into form, the essence of spiritual work involves learning to surrender and let go of all investment in form” (p. 16). Such work is widely recognized as largely being done in the later years.
How is a soul “made” or developed – essentially through hard work via the wisdom traditions, psychotherapy, and the school of hard knocks. “Suffering, in the wisdom traditions, has a clear objective. It is viewed as a prod to spiritual growth. The purpose of pain is to rouse us from the illusion of our separate, form-based ego identities and awaken the true, spiritual being within – the part of us that recognizes our essential unity with all of life” (Seifer & Vieweg, 2009, p. 27). Gurdjieff (Ouspensky, 1949) taught a system of psycho-spirituality called the “Work” or “Fourth Way” whose ultimate purpose was to develop one’s soul and in so doing, to save the world.

Soul making can take many forms. In *Contemplative Aging*, Sherman (2010) describes contemplation and perhaps soul making as including the following: living in harmony with one’s innate potentiality, knowing by inner sight that things are ultimately good, being aware, attentive, and mindful, determining what is actually real beyond our own projections of self, transcendence of normal consciousness, epiphanies, feeling of a cosmic union with the universe, development of a sense of mystery, learning daily how to die, and as an end in itself.

Soul making is the task and process of preparing for an afterlife as well as the effort of realizing our full potential in our earthly life. Yount (2009) saw eschatological implications in spiritual formation among the elderly, namely the preparations of persons for life after physical death. Rather than using spiritual practice during the dying process only for preparing to die, seniors are preparing for a new life. According to Swedenborg’s theology, “we construct our own interior heaven or hell while on earth and are spiritually conjoined with a ‘society’ in the other world whose members are like our true selves” (Fox & Rose, 1996, p. 13). It is our “core intention” – Swedenborg called it our “life’s love” that determines what we choose by attraction as our home in the afterlife. We become our true face or self, our ruling love. We are not judged; rather we simply go to dwell with our own kind (Kirven, 1997).

**Dementia and Stroke as Spiritual Path, Practice and Emergence**

Alzheimer’s disease is called “the long goodbye” as it gradually steals one’s capacity for remembering, learning, functioning, relationships, and eventually life itself. Despite the eventual and seemingly complete loss of memory and cognitive functioning, much is not actually known about the “consciousness” of the person. Some sources and observers tell us that personal work is possibly going on within the psyche of the person. This could include Feil’s (1985) late life stage of dementia, “resolution vs. vegetation” as well as others not yet understood. Feil maintained that many times the person’s fantasies reflect last attempts at resolution of old deep seated life issues. Erikson spoke to a related task in his eighth stage of integrity vs. despair. Perhaps if not integrated earlier, then the work of resolution continues with dementia as social inhibitions and defenses are dropped or lost.

Does our spirituality leave us along with the other functions commonly lost with dementia? Up until recently, there has been very little research on this area
as to whether there is potential growth involved in dementia or whether there is a spiritual nature or knowing left intact. In the last few years research and reports of day to day contact with Alzheimer’s patients indicate possibilities for continued growth. This personal work may also address higher needs or callings such as states of consciousness consistent with spiritual consciousness, near death experience, or life after death states.

According to Boden (cited in Killick, 2006), “It is as if the Alzheimer’s, whilst destroying so much, actually has the capacity to hone the essential nature of the individual” (p. 75). “It [Alzheimer’s] has the potential for enhancing our whole conception of what it is to be human” (p. 78). We no longer “can do,” but what is the essence of the “beingness” left and expressed during dementia? Killick (2006) found that “Memory loss may have the effect of confining the person to present experience, but it may also give those without the condition the opportunity to appreciate qualities associated with being rather than doing” (p. 73). According to many observers, something of a spiritual nature seems to stay with or even evolve as the essence or spirit of the person perhaps as a kind of shift from the mind to the heart” (Killick, 2006).

Trivett and MacKinlay (2006) used spiritual reminiscence work (in-depth interviews and reminiscence groups) to help older adults with memory loss, loss of present meaning, and preparation for death. Such questions and discussions were welcomed by the participants particularly in their need to find meaning in the experience of dementia. The authors concluded, “From the responses and the interactions in these interviews we might argue that although the respondents have dementia, they are experiencing transcendence” (p. 88).

For most of us, memory simply means the retention and retrieval of previously stored information. However, McNamara (1992) has advanced the premise that memory itself can be transpersonal. This transpersonal memory involves the ability to recollect and to recover one’s innate knowledge of the “eternal ideas” and the spiritual experience of humankind. This “doctrine of recollection” asserts that learning is really remembering by our soul of its many lifetimes in this world and the world beyond and by its participation as a providential self in the omniscience of an imminent spiritual principle (McNamara, 1992). Triggers of the recollective experience include suffering, spiritual discipline, the will, and beauty. “While loss of memory is the soul’s true malady, recollection’s ability to lead the soul back to its true nature or homeland constitutes a healing journey for the soul...Recollection allows the soul to return to God” (p. 71). Perhaps in dementia the person moves from retention based memory to a transpersonal, recollective memory that allows access to existences and experiences beyond time and this life.

Cognitive memory loss should be considered part of the curriculum for a conscious aging and dying, including spiritualizing the diminishments of Alzheimer’s. In his three volume chronology of his wife’s experience of Alzheimer’s disease Green (Green & Green, 2001) maintained that such a disease or mental disorder allows the person to move back and forth between “normal” (beta consciousness) and other (higher) states of consciousness.
(alpha or theta) and between consensual reality and astral or subtle planes of existence. This can be accomplished through lucid dreaming, hypnagogic states, OBE’s, nearing death experiences, and clairvoyance or other psi states and, in so doing, connect with “realities” commonly identified as afterlife states of consciousness, i.e., bardo. He further maintained that once this connection with the afterlife is well established, then the person can communicate both with entities or “guides” in the afterlife and, while there, whether pre or post death, with persons still in the physical realm.

Who is it that or what part of us experiences and suffers with Alzheimer’s? According to Elmer and Alyce Green’s (2001) observations, there are three aspects of the person and each communicates as a different voice or entity: the dweller or the self, the soul, and the SOUL, ranging from the demented or low personality to the high personality and to the transpersonal Self or SOUL. With experience and practice, communication rather than being fragmented or distorted, can instead become more coherent and reflective of its actual sources. Transpersonally-based research could begin to further validate these assertions; such research has been done with OBE’s, NDE’s, and ADC’s (R. Moody, 1993).

Cerebral vascular accidents (strokes) may also provide the person with unexpected opportunities for spiritual awareness and practice. In neurobiologist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor’s book *My Stroke of Insight* (2006), the reader is given an exceptionally detailed and expertly qualified description of her massive left hemisphere stroke, from the actual stroke experience through the many steps of her eight year rehabilitation and recovery period. The reader is provided a tour de force of the different functions of each brain hemisphere, the loss and recovery of her left brain functions, her discovery of higher right brain functions of awe, wonder, and joy, commonly associated with a spiritual or transcendentental state of consciousness, and her realization that each person creates his/her own reality through the choices one makes between hemispheric functions and personality traits located in the left brain.

Ram Dass (2000) in his book, “Still Here” and video, “Fierce Grace,” shared his experience with a massive stroke. He does so again for this special issue of the Journal with his characteristic humor and will and his ability to make Spirit a part of all of life. He continues to ask, “What am I supposed to be learning from this?” His answers include:

- how to use the battles of life to come to God; greater suffering elicits higher consciousness; the stroke took away Ego distractions and brought me back to my Soul’s purpose; grace can be loving but it can also be fierce, something you would never choose or want; suffering comes from attachment and clinging to our suffering points the way to where the work is. One doesn’t get cured of a stroke but one can be healed by and through it. Healing [not curing] is what brings us closer to God (Ram Dass, 2000, pp. 197–198, 200–201).

Regarding chronic pain, he gives us one more teaching to consider: “Pain demands that you establish yourself simultaneously in Ego and Soul. What an incredible teacher it is” (p. 193).
In the last two decades, or so, individuals such as David Lukoff, Robert Turner and Francis Lu, Stanislav and Christina Grof, and John Nelson have greatly increased our awareness of the potential for psychopathology and spiritual emergence/emergency to co-present or present as mixed features or symptoms. A new possibility is proposed here for due consideration, namely that “delirium, dementia, and amnestic and other cognitive disorders” (DSM-IV-TR) can co-present with/as various forms of spiritual emergence or emergency. In short, could Alzheimer’s or a stroke provide an opportunity for the person to move beyond beta-state consciousness to an alternative, expanded, or higher state of consciousness?

**PRACTICES OF TRANSPERSONAL GERONTOLOGY**

“Spiritual practices are things we do on a regular basis to celebrate, appreciate, nurture, and act on our experiences of presence, transcending the personal self, and connecting directly with the sacred” (Atchley, 2009, p. 4). Certain conditions of the later years seem to lend much opportunity for spiritual practice and growth including both the possible losses and gains of late life as well as letting go. The losses or diminishments could include loss of relationship, sensory and mental acuity, health and functionality, mobility, meaning and purpose, among others. The gains could include wisdom and understanding, compassion, less ego and need to control, more time/alone time, valuing being over having/doing, freedom from cultural pressures, and greater interiority. Each can become an ideal and necessary condition and can be converted as a medium for spiritual practice.

“Aging is both descent and ascent, both loss and gain. At every point in the human journey we find we have to let go in order to move forward, and letting go means dying a little” (Fischer, 1985, p. 4). This letting go process is named as a vital spiritual practice by most all spiritual traditions. We let go of our individual ego, will, attachments, and addictions in order to open to and receive that which is more, much more. According to Ram Dass, (1992) “aging works to the advantage of spiritual work because as you grow older you become irrelevant so you are free to do your inner work. Moreover, you go deaf, blind, arthritic, can’t more around—what an ideal time to meditate” (audio tape).

The following spiritual practices demonstrate possible late life practices of the spiritual elements previously mentioned. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition instructs all beginning students in a practice called “making difficulties into the path” and involves consciously taking our unwanted sufferings, our sorrows and using them for the nourishment of our patience and compassion. An exercise called the “3A’s” illustrates the “spiritual task of nonattachment” (Kornfield, 1993). To practice distinguishing between acceptance and attachment, the person is asked to monitor everyday attractions, aversions, and periods of being on automatic pilot. As a result the person realizes the extent that he/she is engaged in constantly judging current reality as being acceptable or unacceptable, in being attached to conditions for happiness, and in being on automatic pilot rather than aware.
Jung developed a technique called “active imagination” where a person enters into dialogue with the different parts of self that are unconscious, a kind of “dreaming out loud.” The unconscious responds in the dialogue and provides answers and redirections. This structure is used in the “spiritual eldering” work where the elder-in-training is asked to contact his/her source of wisdom, the Inner Elder or Spiritual Self and receive guidance. Wacks (1994) called this integration of the inner child and inner elder the “Elder-Child” and identified it as a component of transpersonal gerontology. Kornfield (2000) recommended a strategy used for understanding dissatisfaction. Students are instructed to pay precise attention to what motivates each of their actions and movements throughout the day. A technique for evoking compassion is the practice of “tonglen.” The practitioner selects the specific objects of suffering. Then he/she breathes in the pain of the person and breathes out to the person kindness or whatever is needed.

In Buddhism, the spiritual practice of “The Five Remembrances” seems to have a relevancy for the later year: (a) “There is no way to escape aging, I too will grow old, (b) There is no way to escape physical degeneration. My body too will weaken, (c) There is no way to escape death. I too will die, (d) Everything and everyone changes; we must part even from loved ones, (e) My deeds are always with me as propensities. Only my karma accompanies me when I die; my karma is the ground on which I stand” (Surya Das, 1997, p. 255). Rather than trying to deny or avoid these eventual realities, the seeker of the spirit accepts and incorporates these as grist for the mill of growth and soul making. Gurdjieff (Ouspensky, 1949) would call this “deliberate suffering.”

Anticipation or presence of cognitive memory loss could be reframed or used as a spiritual practice of “impermanence.” The classic Buddhist “meditation on death” could be expanded to include the slow death or progressive little deaths of Alzheimer’s disease or many other chronic, debilitating and terminal diseases. With memory loss the person experiences by default the world from “Beginner’s Mind” as he/she forgets and rediscovers the same things over and over again. With dementia we experience the “don’t know mind”; consequently, with long-term mindfulness meditation one could reframe the disorientation and fear to one of “don’t know” and, in so doing, exercise greater control, awareness, and peace.

What of the potential of using meditation to prepare for and perhaps to transform and transcend late life dementia and Alzheimer’s disease? Would a life-long, advanced meditator experience the loss of memory differently than a non-meditator? What if, through meditation and advanced spiritual practice, e.g., Alyce Green, the individual had developed the ability to go beyond reliance on or exclusive identification with the higher cognitive functions and even the primary need for the memory function? By letting go of the contents of the mind every day in practice, we can with less fear, let go of the mind itself (Sherman, 2010). When asked what it was like to be an old yogi, Sri Nisargadatta Marharaj responded, “Oh, I just watch senility come in. I see the memory decompose on an almost daily basis” (p. 41). Then he roared with laughter (Rosenberg, 2001). 

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Each of these elements of late life spirituality is found in and demonstrated through humor. Rather than to be simply victimized by them, a sense of humor permits us to bear and use our sufferings (Bianchi, 1986). In so much as humor acknowledges humankind’s limitations, it provides an antidote against absolutes in life and rigidity of spirit. It can dissolve our illusions and pretense. It can open us to the sacred and to a larger perspective on life (Fischer, 1985). MacKinlay (2004) found significant connections between humor and self-transcendence and spiritual integrity in later life from her in-depth interviews with elders living both independently and in residential aged care. Humor allows us to disengage and detach from daily concerns, attachments, and preferences. It serves as a vehicle for spiritualizing diminishments through providing perspective. Humor requires its recipient to flow in the moment and it can express wisdom and compassion.

**DISCUSSION**

In future efforts to define and develop the field of transpersonal gerontology in terms of theory, research, and practice, the following categories are offered to sort the various proposed approaches, models, and practices:

1. Current models of successful aging, late life maturity, etc. applied to transpersonal psychology.
2. Current models of transpersonal psychology applied to gerontology and the later years.
3. Current models of late life spirituality applied to the field of transpersonal gerontology.
4. New models and categories unrelated to the above categories, free standing and original.

Research questions to guide model or theory development could include the following: What conditions unique to the later years provide conditions conducive to spiritual growth and development? How do these conditions evolve over a life time? What forms do and could this late life spirituality take, how does this compare to other forms, and how could we operationalize such an expression of our spiritual nature(s)? Do spiritual concerns become more important with advanced years? What factors influence such movement or motivation? Does late life spirituality actually express unique or more transcendent characteristics? What impact may the Boomer generation have had on the spirituality of old age, currently and in the future? What is the relationship between age and “awakening experiences”? To what extent do this article’s elements of late life spirituality actually characterize the later years? What effect would “self remembering” long term practice have on Alzheimer’s disease, either in terms of progression or acquisition? To what extent do we learn “life lessons” from our sufferings and what promotes or discourages this? To what extent are the later years characterized by equanimity and presence, de-idolization, flow, being over doing, and so forth? What factors influence such?

Much work still remains to be done for all four of Moody’s stages: rejection, social services, participation, and self actualization/transcendence. As Maslow
(1968), Wilber (2000), Beck and Cowan (2006), and others have long advocated, we will need to address the first three of Moody’s Stages before a consciousness based spirituality is likely to make itself known. Developmental models such as those considered in Integral Psychology (Wilber, 2000,) and Spiral Dynamics (Beck & Cowan, 2006) could assist in efforts to better understand differences, to address conflicts and polarities, and to move our diverse world towards a greater tolerance and appreciation of each other.

Earlier, the reader was asked to join in helping to expand the possibilities for consciousness based spirituality in the later years. Our elders are asking this of us now and the Baby Boomer cohort will certainly do so far into the future. What can each of us, whether currently elders, Baby Boomers, or younger do to advance and realize an “appropriate” spirituality for life’s later years, including what is being described here as a transpersonal gerontology. Appropriate in the sense that this lived spirituality reflects the needs, challenges, and opportunities of this life period, beyond childhood socialization, first maturity and religious teachings.

Just as spirituality and self-transcendence could be more adequately addressed in the field of gerontology, so could concerns, issues, and experiences relating to aging, old age and gerontology be more fully considered in the transpersonal psychology literature. Moreover, just as most mortals fear the loss of ego identity and individuality, so too do most folks, including spiritual aspirants, fear the diminishments, losses, and disabilities that come with old age.

So, in terms of the future of the new field of transpersonal gerontology being advocated and created in this special edition, how will we elders and elders-to-be negotiate and transform our futures and the futures of all succeeding generations? We continue to evolve as a species and we must do so from this point forward. Will this evolution come from the younger generation, from the elders, or hopefully from both? Traditionally the elders had “wisdom” that came from living a long life but now this wisdom from life experience is largely irrelevant given the rapidity of change and our technological and media driven world. Traditionally the elders had wisdom to share that had been passed down from the sacred traditions. Now in this postmodern era, any such tradition is suspect and again irrelevant, not to mention modernity and its emphasis on science and objective/measureable reality.

Reb Zalman speaks of the importance of mentoring and of generativity; it is the stuff of spiritual eldering and is truly called for at this time. So what is it that we mentor or model? According to Hindu tradition, we must become students of the soul before we can be teachers of the soul. We must be capable of teaching before we can be mentors and contribute to those following us. We must be active in our growth and evolution beyond the next media and consumer fixation, even beyond paradigms of truth. What do we believe and on what are these based, what do we intuit in our heart of hearts and how are these to be expressed, and what are we to do with both the grace and burden of a greater and deeper appreciation of life and beyond?
Many great minds currently are of the position that we are at a pivotal point in our evolution as a species, e.g., Michael Murphy, Ken Wilber, John White, Andrew Cohen, and Barbara Marx Hubbard and the list goes on. These individuals are advocating an integral, integrative, and evolutionary approach to healing the polarities of today and for growing consciously into our futures.

It would seem that transpersonal gerontology could and should help to lead the way. How can this be accomplished? First, through the expansion of the spiritual eldering work of Rabbi Zalman and others; second, through a conscious coming together of the Elder-Child (Wacks, 1994); third, making the task of a spirituality of aging that of converting the imaginations of both the old and young to a new vision of the human (Fischer, 1985); and fourth, to begin seeing with new eyes and hearing with new ears. “A spirituality of aging calls into question the deepest values of our civilization” (Fischer, 1985, p. 10). The deepest values of our now global village are currently in turmoil, conflict, and confusion.

So how do the “grown-ups,” the sages, and those “old souls” in youthful bodies come together (Welwood, 2000)? Again, Fischer, “We must undergo a conversion, an experience of losing our song in order to be able to sing it in a new key” (p. 120). What do we need to lose and what new song needs to be heard from us? It seems we need to lose much of our personal and societal “truths” and open to new possibilities of being and knowing; we need to lose our egocic and ethnocentric attachments and open to a more world and cosmoscentric perspective; and we need to lose our beliefs of our own limits as physical human beings and open our minds as well as our brains, to our souls and spirit as well as our bodies, and to all “three faces of God” (Wilber, 2006b). What would this look like, feel like, and be like? Who among us are ready to step up as grownups and sages for we need to both “grow up” and “wake up”...

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Many possibilities will be generated as more people begin to consider and to share the potential of transpersonal gerontology and their own later years. Six such possibilities will now be addressed.

First, Jerry Ellison’s earlier Phenix Society’s “Wisdom College” of study groups, wisdom books to order, and conferences could be revisited and updated via new forms and formats, i.e., web sites, Eldering Centers, Institutes for Learning in Retirement, Elderhostel/Road Scholar, and progressive senior centers, churches, and lifelong learning programs. Second, Ram Dass (2000) mentioned the need for “ashram-like hospitals” where patients and staff would all be in “satsang” and doing sickness and care giving as spiritual practice. Ashram-like nursing homes and independent living facilities could be considered as well. Current examples are programs at Pacific Institute in San Francisco, “Age-Song Institute of Elder Wellness” and “Awakening Institute of Mental Wellness.” Many long term facilities have adopted “The Eden Alternative,” the “Household Model” or the “Green House Project.”
For more possibilities on these ideas check Schachter-Shalomi and Miller’s *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* section on “Spiritual Eldering Retreat Centers” and “Eldering HMO’s” where specialists in the emerging field of transpersonal gerontology can guide residents in contemplative skills and conscious aging along with the more traditional tasks of the later years. Moreover we could be initiated in the process of becoming “sages” etc. wherein we are capable to guide succeeding generations in wise living and the wisdom traditions. Such programming could also be instituted in residential communities, community-based services, and long-term care facilities. Given the numbers of the boomer generation, the above text speaks further of “the rise of elder culture” where personal and spiritual growth is pursued for oneself and for the renewal of our Western religious traditions, and a revised and hopeful image of old age replaces the current association of old age with physical deterioration and death.

Third, further opportunities exist in way of publications such as journal articles for psychology, gerontology, health, medicine, religion and other related disciplines, published research on the experiences and questions proposed in this special issue, and publications geared to both the professional and popular literature. More specifically, this article and special issue is reaching out from the area of transpersonal psychology to the journals of gerontology and is asking our colleagues in gerontology to join us in this newly emerging field of transpersonal gerontology. After all, you carry half the name! We currently have the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Aging* and *Aging and Spirituality* along with the *International Journal of Aging and Human Development, Generations, The Gerontologist, Journal of Mental Health & Aging, Educational Gerontology, Journal of Gerontological Social Work, Journal of Gerontological Nursing and Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*. According to Moody (2010), “gerontology, until recently, took little account of developments in humanistic and transpersonal psychology or even acknowledged what Maslow called ‘the further reaches of human nature’. As the 21st century advances, we may hope that students of aging and of life courses will take seriously a wider sense of human possibilities” (p. 156). This special issue points the way with directions for finding the truth of the “More” in the later years.

Fourth, conferences of relevant national and state associations such as APA Section 20, Division of Adult Development and Aging, Association of Gerontology in Higher Education, Gerontological Society of America, American Society on Aging, the Associations of Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology, and the Integral Institute could sponsor symposia on late life spirituality, courses on life-span and adult development and gerontology, and could add units on late life spirituality. Courses, texts and even programs could be developed on how to apply “spiritual eldering,” gerotranscendence, and transpersonal gerontology to such areas as health and hospice care, wellness, lifelong formal, informal, adult and continuing education, family life, church and religious organizations, leisure pursuits, and government policy and programs among others. The Institute of Noetic Sciences in Petaluma, CA is already conducting major programming and research on “Conscious Aging.” The article in this issue on “Conscious Aging and Worldview Transformation” by Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, Cassandra Vieten, and Kathleen Erickson-
Freeman focuses on their groundbreaking research and educational programs. The Integral practices championed by George Leonard and Michael Murphy (Integral Transformative Practice) and Ken Wilber (Integral Life Practice) are encouraged to give the later years due consideration. The sources named in this special issue provide the literature, research, and practice for such presentations, courses, dissertations, and programs. The impact of the aging of this huge Boomer cohort on society is beyond comprehension and begs, even screams, for due consideration.

Fifth, the new arena of transpersonal gerontology could take us even beyond our later years by giving due consideration to the current wealth of quality research and literature on life after death, including dying and grief, and to the relationship between life before life, life during life, and life after life (Bastian & Staley, 2009; Carter, 2010; Currie, 1979; Fenwick & Fenwick, 2008; Holden, Greyson, & James, 2009; Newton, 2000; Singh, 2000; Wacks, 1988, Wink, 1999). Additional areas of study and research could be called “transpersonal thanatology” (death and dying) or “transpersonal eschatology” (life after death) Christel and David Lukoff’s article “Spiritual Care at the End of Life: How Folktales Can Guide Us” in this issue speaks to a means of providing assistance in the dying process and to the need for a transpersonal thanatology. The reader is encouraged to become familiar with the Journal of Near-Death Studies, Omega, and the annual meetings of the International Association of Near-Death Studies (IANDS) with headquarters located at 2741 Campus Walk Avenue, Building 500, Durham, N. C. 27705-8878 and website: www.iands.org.

Finally, our Growth Centers across the country could and should play a major role in addressing the psycho-spiritual needs of the Boomers and beyond, now and in the future. Rather than targeting and attracting mostly folks in the first half of life, our current and future Growth Centers could market programs as well for the second half of life, including the later years, i.e., retiring baby boomers? The Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California has been described as “where paths inward are offered, where they come to discover again their souls, their bodies, their pain, their knowledge, their happiness at being alive…Esalen is a Kingdom of Death and Rebirth. It is a place inside each of us” (Tarnas, 1978). The Omega Institute of Rhinebeck, New York has done much in promoting the elder cause with its conscious aging and spiritual eldering conferences and Ram Dass library. Growth Centers could become as “natural monasteries” that both blend Esalen and Omega, Gurdjieff and Swedenborg, this life and the after-life, young and old, ancient and eternal, in time and timeless, and dual and non-dual, etc. For we all desire the same thing. As Meister Eckhart explained: “If a person catches just one fleeting glance of the joy and bliss (of God), it will compensate him for everything he has ever had to suffer” (cited in Moody, 1997, p. 314).

Notes

1 In Integral Psychology, pages 197–217 Wilber (2000) cites the life span theories of most everyone, over 100 listed, who has delved into this line of writing or research, including those theorists who stayed with the
conventional levels of development, i.e., Piaget, to those who have ventured into the higher, (highest) levels of
development in their many aspects and beyond.

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HOW AM I LIVING AND PRACTICING TRANSPERSONAL GERONTOLOGY? AUTHOR’S NOTE

I am currently 64 years of age, or according to Rabbi Zalman’s lifespan model, I am in the October or the last 4th of my life. Turning 60 sent me into a three month depression that both frightened and challenged me to hear its message of mortality and to heed its call to something More. Just after this period, I was accompanying my Elderhostel group out of the Visitor’s Center of the Cumberland Gap National Historic Park when my attention was drawn to a near-by small tree of some 15 feet in height by a light that was shining from out of its leafy midsection. From the light came a voice that plainly said, “You are doing…what you are…here to do.” The light quickly faded and I was left to wonder about the meaning of the message. I

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looked around at the hostelers and thought, “this couldn’t be what it meant, as I have been doing this for nearly a quarter century.” I truly appreciated the message of affirmation but was left to wonder – until a couple of years later when I received the email from the editor of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Dr. Marcie Boucouvalas, telling me that she supported my suggestion that the JTP publish a special issue on “transpersonal gerontology” and asking me if I would like to be guest editor of the special issue. While reflecting on the opportunity, the vision of the light in tree flashed back to me. I gave thanks for its further clarification and wrote the affirmative email.

I am professor and program director of psychology at Lincoln Memorial University (L.M.U.) in East Tennessee. I am trained in counseling psychology and have been a member of the Association of Transpersonal Psychology since the 1970’s. For several years I taught a required psychology course in transpersonal psychology at L.M.U. I also have a doctorate in adult education and a graduate certificate in gerontology. In 1986 I developed an academic minor and certificate in gerontology and became coordinator of the new campus Elderhostel program. I have taught in both the gerontology and the Elderhostel programs as well as in adult and senior education for the University of Tennessee (UTK) and the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) Programs in near-by Knoxville, TN. I have taught a college course on death & dying and life after death for non-credit for the last 30 years and later taught soul making, daily life as spiritual practice and spiritual eldering for UTK, IONS and Elderhostel. I went through training in “spiritual eldering” at the Omega Institute and have trained with many of the leading proponents of humanistic, transpersonal and integral psychology at the Esalen Institute and elsewhere. Most all my publications and presentations at professional conferences have involved spirituality and aging. My call for a “transpersonal gerontology” came in an article in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* in 1994 following a presentation on the topic at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Transpersonal Psychology in 1990.

I attempt to live life as fully as I can both because I am made that way and because my life may be compromised by familial genetics. I see myself as a budding “spiritual elder.” I am aided in this effort by the fortunate and appreciated presence of friends and adult students who seek the same for themselves. The origin of my spiritual orientation came at age 21 with a “spiritual awakening experience.” I practice mindfulness meditation, work with all “three faces of God” via Wilber (2006b), and follow the Gurdjieff “Work.” I am aware of my diminishments. The elements of non-attachment, equanimity and presence, wisdom and compassion are upmost in my spiritual practices and teaching. My calling is to share this special issue and emerging field of transpersonal gerontology with all kindred spirits in this classroom of soul-making. Namaste!

The Author

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Coordinator of the Gerontology Program and the Elderhostel/Road Scholar Program for 25 years. He has completed doctoral coursework in both Counseling Psychology and Adult Education and holds a graduate certificate in Gerontology. His teaching, clinical, and research interests include late life spirituality (“Spiritual Eldering”), integration of psychospiritual content into the undergraduate psychology and general curriculum, life after death and applied integral theory. His previous publications have appeared in journals of psychology, adult education, death studies, and gerontology. In 1987 he received the Alex Haley Gerontology Award from Alex Haley for services rendered to the elders of the region. He has been a member of the Association of Transpersonal Psychology since the 1970’s and is a member of the Sage-ing Guild.
HOW SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND DEVELOPMENT INTERACT WITH AGING

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ABSTRACT: Transpersonal gerontology focuses on factors associated with growth in (a) ability to perceive the spiritual elements of all types of human experiences, (b) capacity to perceive from a vantage point in higher levels of consciousness, and (c) openness to experiences of connection with all of being. The term spirituality refers to an inner field of human experience. It is a capacity that can grow enormously over time. Many of the most spiritually developed human beings are older men and women. Most adults have had experiences they would label spiritual, and most see themselves as being on a spiritual journey. Spirituality has great potential as a vital region of continued psychological growth throughout adulthood but especially in old age. Successive personal narratives of the spiritual journey are excellent sources for studying these factors.

If transpersonal psychology is about integrating spiritual and self-transcendent experiences into psychology, then gerontology—the study of aging—is a field within which transpersonal psychology could be expected to have a very strong impact. For thousands of years, old age has been recognized as a stage of life in which many people reach their peak of spiritual perceptiveness, self-transcendence, and sense of connection with the ground of being. My book, Spirituality and Aging (Atchley, 2009), makes exactly this case. This article extends the work of my book by connecting it with transpersonal psychology.

Transpersonal gerontology focuses on factors associated with growth in (a) ability to perceive the spiritual elements of all types of human experiences, (b) capacity to perceive from a vantage point in higher levels of consciousness, and (c) openness to experiences of connection with all of being. The term spirituality refers to an inner field of human experience. It is a capacity that can grow enormously over time. Many of the most spiritually developed human beings are older men and women. Most adults have had experiences they would label spiritual, and most see themselves as being on a spiritual journey. Spirituality has great potential as a vital region of continued psychological growth throughout adulthood.

First and foremost, spirituality is a region of experience. Without our own inner experience of the spiritual region of life, talk about spirituality is akin to science fiction. One can imagine what spiritual experience might be like, but by no means is it the same thing as having the experience.

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Here are some responses from my interviews:

As I thought about [what makes an experience spiritual], I began to wonder if any experiences are not spiritual. If being spiritual is part of our nature, maybe even the central part, which I believe it is, then as long as we are being, there is a spiritual element. Whether we are aware of them [this] is another thing. *Man, age 92*

Life is more and more spiritual all the time. I have an ongoing experience of being part of a network. It is the backdrop to everything. Sometimes it is faint, almost not there, when I deal with the logistics of everything that I am part of and that is part of me. This “tuning in” has become easier since I moved out of the city. *Woman, age 52*

As a viewpoint or vantage point, spirituality can take three basic forms: intense awareness of the present, transcendence of the personal self, or a feeling of connection with the ground of being—variably conceived as all of life, the universe, a supreme being, a great web of being, and many other conceptions. Most people grow into these perspectives in a succession or upward spiral of increasing understanding we call spiritual development or spiritual growth. Some come to recognize that these vantage points are interrelated and can reside in awareness simultaneously.

The concept of a spiritual journey refers to an individual’s personal narrative about her or his spiritual life and development, including its ups and downs. This narrative usually includes a history of experiences, actions, and insights connected with a search for spiritual meaning and understanding. Underlying the spiritual journey is an intentional process of seeking spiritual experiences, using values and insights informed by spiritual experience to make life choices, and learning from experience with this process. Spiritual journeys also involve learning to persist and be content on a journey into imperfectly known territory, where insights are always limited, no matter how profound they seem at the time. People who have been on a spiritual journey for decades usually have developed a sense of humor about the contradictions and paradoxes they encounter, even as they use these enigmas as food for contemplation. People usually learn not to force the issue. Waiting is an important spiritual practice among elders—not “waiting for” but just waiting. In the space created by patient waiting or contemplation, direct connection with the ground of being may be more likely.

Most spiritual journeys involve elements of commitment, self-discipline, and regular spiritual practice. Some people believe that we become what we think, but there is evidence that we are more likely to become what we do (Walsh, 1999). Returning to spiritual practice over and over again creates habits of mind, habits of body, and habits of being that come to seem natural. If these practices are part of an open context of spiritual seeking, these habits can become enlivening. To many advanced spiritual practitioners, every day appears as a new day. Spiritual practices are things done on a regular basis to celebrate, appreciate, invite, or act on experiences of presence, transcending the
personal self, and connecting directly with the ground of being. Many types of meditation and prayer, devotional rituals and music, inspirational reading and reflection, and movement-oriented spiritual disciplines can be mixed and matched to support a contemplative, practice-oriented spirituality.

Considerable evidence supports the idea that spiritual concerns, experience, and development become increasingly important for many people in middle and later life. This evidence is found in the narratives of individuals as well as in social science surveys (Atchley & Barusch, 2004). Beginning around age 35 or 40, as age increases, so does the proportion of people who are consciously involved in an inner exploration of the meaning of their existence and their relation to the universe. Albert Winseman (2003) reported that adults age 65 or older were more than twice as likely to see themselves as spiritually committed than were adults 45 to 54. Spiritually committed people are often engaged in spiritual practices that heighten the possibility of numinous, mystical experience. In addition, those who experience transcendent, non-personal levels of consciousness often feel called to serve, and spiritually rooted service takes many forms.

We usually experience spirituality not in an inner vacuum of pure existence but in the context of acting in some way, even if that action is deep contemplation while sitting relatively still. Undoubtedly, pure being is present underneath everything we do. If we were not experiencing being, at least in the background of our awareness, then how could we experience anything else?

The spiritual journey can be seen as a quest for balance between being and doing. In the process of learning to function in the social worlds into which we are born—family, work, community, society, and so on—many people become overly focused on acting within the context of socially defined positions and roles, their attention is absorbed by this social world, and they lose sight of the liberating qualities of being that are there also. We learn to identify with our niches, actions, and lifestyles rather than with our more fundamental being. The spiritual journey is often about learning to bring being back into consciousness. People are often motivated toward this sort of journey by their feeling that something is missing from their conventional role-centered lives. For many people, learning to bring being back into consciousness introduces a healthy distance from, and perspective on, social roles and also a needed element of creativity and spontaneity to one’s lived experience.

The essence of fully developed spirituality is an intense aliveness and deep understanding that one intuitively comprehends as coming from a direct, internal link with that mysterious principle that connects all aspects of the universe. As fully awakened spiritual beings, people feel their interconnectedness with everything. In most spiritual traditions, mysticism lies at the heart of spirituality. Mysticism refers to transcendent, contemplative experiences that enhance spiritual understanding.

Humans are notoriously susceptible to self-deception, so how do we know that mystical clarity is real? This is why many spiritual traditions counsel dialogue
with a circle of sages to identify and deal with ego-based self-deception. The realized sage is one whose inner process always leads back to a core of being that is free of personal considerations. But our society generally lacks a framework for identifying sages and giving us the opportunity to get their counsel (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995).

So, why do most elders experience turning inward and a profound shift toward dwelling in higher levels of consciousness? Few perspectives on psychological development recognize the interactions between aging, life stage, and spiritual development. Two that do are Erik Erikson’s stages of psycho-social development and Lars Tornstam’s theory of gerotranscendence.

Erikson’s theory (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986) presumes that as we grow, achieve maturity, and age, we confront a predictable set of developmental dilemmas associated with each life stage we enter. For Erikson, spiritual development begins in middle age with a development of generativity—a concern for the well-being of younger generations—which balances our self-absorption. In later adulthood we develop wisdom to balance integrity and despair. Integrity is being able to stand back from the mosaic of one’s multitude of characteristics and life experiences, both positive and negative, and see this mosaic as an interconnected whole. To do this, we have to be able to look directly at our negative qualities and life experiences, accept them, and move on into being who we are (Hillman, 1999). If we cannot do this, then negative personal qualities and experiences can drag us into despair. Having practice adopting a transpersonal vantage point is a key asset in this balancing process.

Spirituality finds its way into Erikson’s framework through the gradual emergence of a type of consciousness that results in a “heightened awareness that can by no means be claimed by the usual ‘ego’” (1986, p. 51). Erikson defined this as a special kind of “I,” which could be called a transpersonal “I am.”

Using Erikson’s framework, one can see that the young adult’s quest for intimacy, the middle-aged person’s concern for generativity, and the older person’s concern for transcendent wisdom as involving successive increases in capacity to stand outside one’s own self-centered agendas and feel connection and concern for things larger than oneself. This capacity is rooted in existential spirituality. The “sense of ‘I’ in old age still has a once-for-all chance of transcending time-bound identities and sensing, if only in the simplest terms, an all-human and existential identity which world religions have attempted to create” (p. 53).

For Erikson, wisdom is the result of balancing integrity and despair in old age, realizing that both are part of life at that stage. Wisdom is one of those words that we use as if everyone knows what it means, but it is hard to define. Wisdom is revered, but what is it that we revere? In my opinion we revere the ability to respond to a situation with clarity, compassion, deep understanding, broad knowledge, deep listening, and well-honed interpersonal skills. This is no
small skill set, and it rests in two main domains: well-contemplated life experience and transpersonal consciousness. It is this contemplative, transpersonal mental space that sets wise elders apart.

However, wisdom does not just appear. It results from practice. When situations ask for wisdom, the spiritually mature are more likely to be able to respond, mainly because they have been willing to act as a wise person in the past and have been asked to be wise before. When we are asked for our wisdom, it demands that we be able to go to a transpersonal place within our consciousness from which we can manifest the characteristics of wisdom. This process has been going on in humans for thousands of years.

Here is an example. In his mid-eighties, William projects an air of robust good health. He attends a worship group regularly, but rarely speaks. Yet he constantly serves as a living example of what it means to be radiantly at peace. He is comfortable with his spiritual nature, and it shows in his clear, soft voice, bright gray eyes, and ready smile. There is a serenity about William’s being that many people in the group have remarked on. There is also a sense that the group is missing an important presence when William is not there.

Gerotranscendence theory (Tornstam, 2005) asserts that spiritual development gradually and steadily increases from middle age onward and results in a shift from a materialistic, role-oriented life philosophy to a transcendent, spiritual perspective in late old age. According to Tornstam, gerotranscendence is present to some extent in most aging adults, but becomes a prevalent metaperspective mainly in adults over 70. Gerotranscendence varies within the older population because it can be promoted or stifled by social factors such as language, normative constraints, opportunity structures, social class and education. Evidence generally supports these various assertions (Atchley, 2009; Sherman, 2010).

The broadened spiritual perspective that typifies mature gerotranscendence has three dimensions. In the cosmic dimension, concepts such as life, death, space and time are seen as involving an element of mystery and are seen against at backdrop of infinity. In the self-transcendent dimension, the personal self is no longer the center of attention, and there is increased honesty and acceptance about the personal self. In the social selectivity dimension, relationships focus mainly on close friends and family, and much less energy is spent relating to casual acquaintances and strangers, with a consequent increase in solitude and less emphasis on pro forma role playing. Attitudes toward material possessions shift from acquisition to maintaining the bare essentials for a comfortable life. Social selectivity leads to a much more thoughtful, contemplative stance toward relationships, activities, and lifestyles.

When I first began to lose my hearing, I was frustrated that I could no longer effortlessly participate in things. I often didn’t know what was going on because I couldn’t hear the discussion or directions or whatever. I tried reading lips but never really got the hang of it. Then I began trying to simply be” with people—to merely be there with them, to look gently into their eyes,
to sense their energy. It was an amazingly pleasant experience, and I would often smile a little, which seemed to make people relax. My world is mostly silent now, and I have lots of friends to guide me through it safely. *Man, age 85*

When I was a boy, I attended a boarding school where we spent great energy memorizing psalms. Now I am old, hard of hearing, and blind, and I find great pleasure in being able to recall these psalms from my memory. I sometimes feel moved to recite a psalm for friends, and I am so at home with the text that I feel I can go beyond the text to touch the source from which the psalms came. *Man, age 89*

So, what stimulates new cycles of spiritual development? For Erikson it is the demands of a new life stage. For Tornstam transcendence is an inexorable inner magnet that, absent sociocultural or personal hindrance, draws people to it more and more as they move into later life. For me (Atchley, 2009), cycles of spiritual development are responses to events and reflections in individual lives—a parent dies, divorce happens, we confront a major health problem, on reflection we feel that something is missing in life, we feel attraction to new spiritual experience, we feel that there must be more to life. The variety of circumstances that can lead to spiritual seeking is enormous and highly individual. Once interest in spiritual growth is awakened, people can go through periods of learning, practice, contemplation, integration, and intention. Cycles usually end with a new or renewed sense of spiritual direction. In this view, spiritual development is creative and improvisational, and the individual is ultimately in charge.

Contemplation exponentially grows more important for many people as they age. When elders are “just sitting,” we are quick to assume that there is nothing going on, but we may be badly wrong. I had the following conversation with an 80-year-old woman:

“There are times when you seem to be in a far-off place in your mind,” I said.

“Yes,” she said.

“Is it a pleasant place?” I asked.

“Oh my, yes” she said.

“Can you tell me what it is like?” I asked.

She replied, “Words don’t describe it. It’s warm and cozy. Thoughts come and go, but are of no importance. I feel completely at peace.”

No wonder she liked to have her contemplative time in the afternoons. We should be careful not to assume that everyone needs to be busy all the time. Contemplative time is important, too.

So, how do we study spiritual development? Erikson relied mostly on case study methods to create his framework, whereas Tornstam did extensive survey
research on elders in several countries. My own research is based partly on 20 years of longitudinal panel data but only for a limited number of questions. Most of my good ideas and evidence came from listening to or reading more than 500 responses to a very general question: “Tell me, how did you become the spiritual being you are today?”

My ideal data set would contain accounts of spiritual journeys beginning early in adulthood with an update near every decade birthday. With such data it might be possible to overcome some of the problems with retrospective accounts. The main problem with retrospective accounts is that the past is very malleable and history is very revisionist, especially for elders.

I prefer individual accounts of the spiritual journey for several reasons. First, the accounts are in the language of the specific individual, and I believe Kelly (1955) was correct in his assertion that while we may seem to be using the same language, in fact we attach so many personal meanings to each word that it takes a lot of context to understand another’s meaning. Second, with concepts such as spiritual experience and spirituality, triangulation of language is one of the best techniques for understanding how someone conceives of a field. Third, narratives of the spiritual journey are highly individualized reflections of personal values and constructions of life events and circumstances. If free to construct their own narratives, individuals provide a richness of context and process that is very difficult to find with structured interviews and questionnaires. Fourth, how people construct their spiritual journey narrative is in itself important data. It reveals much about how people interpret their spiritual experiences. Since spirituality is ultimately a subjective experience, subjective methods are very apropos.

Spiritual experience, spiritual development, and transpersonal states of consciousness are mostly absent from gerontology research, education, and practice today. This represents a tremendous opportunity for transpersonal psychology to fulfill an important part of its promise.

**How Am I Living and Practicing Transpersonal Gerontology? Author’s Note**

I have been interested in spiritual experience since I was a young boy, but my conscious spiritual journey did not begin until the mid-1970s, when I was about 35. I was director of a large gerontology center, author of several books, a full professor with tenure, and award-winning teacher. The rest of my life was successful and “on-schedule” in terms of personal, family and community involvement. Yet I felt that there had to be more to life than this, and I embarked on a spiritual quest. Ever the academic, I began with a systematic search of the literature in the field of spirituality, and I found this field rich in perspectives and insights but also confusing. In addition to reading, I took numerous workshops and retreats concerning human potential, Hindu and Buddhist meditation and philosophy, and journeying inward. This subjective work helped me a great deal to understand the many layers of my consciousness.
I was struck by the extent to which research and teaching about adult development and aging had ignored spiritual concerns. Many people I interviewed in my research on adaptation to aging and encountered on my personal spiritual journey were elders who had been consciously nurturing their spiritual capacities for many decades and for whom spirituality was a strong motivating force in their lives, a significant anchor for their lifestyle decision making, and an important resource in coping with what life brought. Yet these elders were invisible, missing from what was being studied or taught in gerontology and adult development.

In the summers of 1978 and 1979, I spent several weeks in Bombay, India, engaging in dialogues with the noted Indian sage Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a master of Advaita Vedanta but who taught from an existentialist perspective. I returned from India fully in touch with my own present-moment awareness, non-personal consciousness, and contemplative consciousness. I began from then to practice being in these realms of consciousness as much as possible. This continues to be a difficult but very rewarding spiritual path for me.

By 1980, I had collected enough scholarly material on spiritual development to begin to include this subject in my graduate course on adult psychological development. I also began to include questions on spirituality in my twenty-year longitudinal study of adaptation to aging (Atchley, 1999). Steadily, for more than a decade, I developed fluency with the emerging non-religious vocabulary on spirituality, because I saw this language as a key for communicating about spirituality while avoiding the experience of division that often accompanies the use of religious concepts and language about spirituality in interfaith or secular settings.

In 1992, I attended a conference called “Conscious Aging,” which was sponsored by the Omega Institute and featured speakers such as Ram Dass and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi from the world of spiritual awakening and development and Maggie Kuhn, Rick Moody and Thomas Cole from the world of gerontology. I was invited by Omega to be part of a think tank on “The Future of Conscious Aging,” in the summer of 1995. I went on to present my perspectives on spiritual development in workshops with both Ram Dass and Reb Zalman in the late 1990s.

During that same time period I also began publishing my ideas about spirituality and spiritual development. I published articles on spiritual development and wisdom, the everyday nature of mysticism in later life, and the relationship between spirituality and aging. I also published the results of my longitudinal study, which showed that the importance of spiritual development grew as people in the panel aged (Atchley, 1999).

I mention this background to make three points: (a) I have been working in gerontology for more than 40 years and in the field of spirituality and spiritual development for more than 30 years, (b) I have done a lot of researching, especially interviewing more than a thousand people, contemplating, and
writing about spiritual, spiritual development, and aging, and (c) I have learned much from the fires of criticism associated with my lengthy list of publications on these subjects.

I did not develop my ideas and language about spirituality and aging sitting in an “ivory tower.” I developed them using an open feedback system in which I read and reflected, interviewed and observed aging people, listened to sages, meditated, wrote summaries and tentative conclusions, took these imperfect insights out into the field and got feedback, and went back to the drawing board over and over. I have readjusted my intellectual frames of reference and information base many times over the course of this journey. A main challenge is to remain open to discovery. The more I can keep my attachments to my own ideas loose, the greater possibility for new clarity to appear. I am still practicing daily the integration of present-moment, non-personal, and cosmic consciousness.

During the period when my ideas were developing, I have myself grown older, of course. I was in my early 40s when I started writing and teaching about spiritual development, and as I write this I am 71. This is not a necessary qualification for understanding spirituality, spiritual development, and aging, but my personal experiences, especially integrating spirituality with “life,” have provided me with a depth and richness of experience that I am sure has made me a better, more tuned-in reader, listener, and participant. Living with the concepts and language for such a long time has affected what I perceive in texts I read, conversations I hear, and experiences I have. I am much more aware now of the layers that lie within texts and the high degree to which adequate interpretation of what one sees depends on deep background with the subject. I think it is no accident that, for centuries, philosophical and spiritual wisdom has mostly been the province of people with a lot of well-contemplated experience with the subject.

*Parts of the text of this article are adapted from Atchley (2009).*

**ENDNOTE**

1 There is no generally accepted word for the class of experiences that many people call “spiritual.” We use spiritual as a placeholder for this class of experiences, recognizing that the word carries negative connotations for a significant minority of Americans. Also, the English word spiritual cannot easily be translated to or from other languages. Spiritual is a sensitizing concept rather than a denotative concept. This means that it refers to a region of experience that covers a wide variety of types of experience. It does not denote a specific type of experience.

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The Author

Robert C. Atchley, Ph.D., is Distinguished Professor of Gerontology (emeritus) from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where he served as director of the Scripps Gerontology Center (1974–1998). His gerontology interests include adult development and adaptation, spiritual development, and work and retirement. He is known for developing continuity theory, a widely-used framework for understanding individual adaptation to aging. He wrote the first best-selling textbook in social gerontology, currently in its 10th edition and was principal investigator in a 20-year NIMH-funded longitudinal study of adaptation to retirement and aging, the findings of which were published in his book, *Continuity and Adaptation in Aging* (1999).

Dr. Atchley was President of the American Society on Aging (1988 to 1990) served in numerous leadership positions in the Gerontological Society of America and the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, and as associate editor, *Encyclopedia of Gerontology*, founding editor of the journal, *Contemporary Gerontology*. He is author of more than 100 articles and book chapters in the social gerontology literature, more than 200 op-ed pieces and more than two dozen books and research monographs, including *The Sociology of Retirement* (1976), *Aging: Continuity and Change* (1987), *Continuity and Adaptation in Aging: Creating Positive Experiences* (1999), and ten editions of his introductory gerontology text, *Social Forces and Aging* (2004). His latest book, *Spirituality and Aging* published by Johns Hopkins University press early in 2009, received the Richard Kalish Award for Innovation Publication from the Gerontological Society of America in 2009. He has received over a dozen awards for his scholarship, teaching, and professional service in the field of aging: the ASA Award and the Dychtwald Award from the American Society on Aging and three from the Behavioral and Social Sciences Section of the Gerontological Society of America: Career Achievement (1999), Mentoring (1994), and Innovative Publication (2009).
MATURING INTO GEROTRANSCENDENCE

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**ABSTRACT:** According to the empirically based theory of gerotranscendence, the individual moving toward gerotranscendence may experience a series of gerotranscendental changes or developments. These include a redefinition of the self and of relationships to others, as well as a new understanding of fundamental existential questions. It is not farfetched to associate this with a kind of transpersonal development. Gerotranscendence, however, does not imply any state of withdrawal or disengagement, as is sometimes believed. It is not the old disengagement theory in a new disguise. Rather, it is a theory describing a developmental pattern that goes beyond the old dualism of activity and disengagement. Research in various parts of the world confirms the existence of gerotranscendence, and lately a promising new type of counseling based on the theory has been created in countries as widely dispersed as Sweden and Taiwan.

Author Note: The theory of gerotranscendence was born, almost 25 years ago, to address what I saw as a mismatch between present theories in social gerontology and some existing empirical data. Based on intellectual input from scholars such as Jung and Erikson, together with qualitative as well as quantitative data, I have been able to capture a certain kind of positive aging in a grounded-theory-like concept I have called gerotranscendence. The theory suggests that human aging includes a potential to mature into a new outlook on and understanding of life. Gerotranscendence implies a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction.

**RETHINKING PUZZLING FINDINGS**

Since the very beginning of scientific gerontology, the misery perspective has been a recurrent theme in the research. Gerontologists have predicted, as I have as well, various problems connected with aging and old age, and have been puzzled when, for example, retirement is not typically perceived as a trauma or when old people do not report as much loneliness as we expect them to. To date, many studies have shown that retirement does not normally imply a trauma, and lately Westerlund et al. (2009) found, in their very large longitudinal study, that when it comes to subjective health and well-being, retirement even seems to serve as a kind of rejuvenating cure. On average, retirement makes people feel healthier and better than they did prior to retirement. In Sweden, repeated surveys have shown that, on average, problems of loneliness do not increase with age as most people believe, but

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rather decrease with age (Tornstam, Rydell, Vik, & Öberg, 2010). Figure 1 summarizes two postal surveys in which questions about loneliness were answered by 2,795 Swedes in 1985, and 1,742 Swedes in 2008. The degree of loneliness, as reproduced in the graph, is an index based on questions concerning how often the respondent feels lonely, how intense the feeling is when it occurs, how much loneliness the respondent feels as compared to how the respondent thinks others of the same age feel, whether the respondent feels lonely in the company of others and whether the respondent feels lonely right now.

When examining the graph, note that it is a “blow-up” of the part of the index scale on which the mean values and slopes are located. The scale as such varies from 0 to 18. This also means that all differences are blown up. This said, the two most striking features in the figure must be (a) how loneliness basically declines with age, and (b) how similar the results are across the 23-year period. If we accept these as factual invariances and try to understand them, a number of possible explanations come to the fore. One such explanation might be that, as we age and mature, we learn to handle life better, another that when aging, we also transcend some barriers surrounding our Selves and thus become more “transpersonal” and less prone to feeling lonely.

I have described the above and other perplexing findings elsewhere (Tornstam, 2005), as well as our tendency to explain them away as “errors in methods” rather than as “errors in theory.” We social scientists can be very imaginative.

Figure 1. Loneliness among Swedes in 1985 and 2008.
when, for example, trying to explain away the findings presented in Figure 1. If, for example, you only take the data from 1985 into consideration and only look at the last two age categories, at the same time as you change the index scale to cover only values from 6.0 to 7.0, you get a blow-up that certainly seems to confirm the assumption of increasing loneliness with age, even though this blown-up difference is not statistically significant. And to be sure, all studies have their drawbacks, but why must we always try to use the “error in methods” argument when we are confronted with interesting contradicting data that in fact imply that reality does not adhere to theory?

Experiencing just that, and dissatisfied with the state of the art, I began more than 20 years ago to experiment with some new theoretical ideas and studies in an attempt to achieve a better match between the empirical data and theory. Inspired by, among others, Jung (1930), Gutmann (1976) and Chinen (1985, 1986), I started conducting qualitative interviews with old people, who told about how they had perceived their lives in various phases and transitions. It was then I discovered how life was often described as a positive development involving increased life satisfaction in the context of a developmental pattern typically including a redefinition of the self and relations to other people, as well as a new way of understanding existential questions. These informants described how they had become less self-occupied and at the same time more selective in their choice of social and other activities. A transpersonal sense of affinity with others and with earlier generations had developed, as well as a sense of being part of a whole. Informants also talked about a kind of redefinition of time, space, life and death, and an increased need for positive contemplative solitude. These changes are often misunderstood by relatives, who label them as pathological. Old mothers are thought to be depressed, lonely, lacking in activities or on the brink of some kind of dementia. However, the individuals we interviewed did not suffer from any pathological conditions. They enjoyed life and expressed great satisfaction. What I saw in these early interviews was the unfolding of a new and intriguing developmental pattern, and I decided to use the term Gerotranscendence to describe it. I chose the prefix Gero- as in gerontology and the suffix transcendence, because it seemed to me that much of what my informants described concerned transcending borders and barriers that had circumscribed them earlier in life. Based on these early qualitative interviews, I conducted a number of large quantitative studies, which are described in Tornstam (2005). In these studies, different random samples of Swedish and Danish inhabitants in the age range 20 and 104 years were kind enough to answer questions about their outlook on life, themselves and their relations to others. Without going into technical details, I will provide a brief summary of how these studies together define and describe gerotranscendence in relation to three major dimensions and their respective signs. In each of the dimensions, I have gathered signs that qualitatively belong together. The Cosmic dimension is about broad existential changes, while the dimension of The self concerns changes in the view of the present self and the

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1The theory of gerotranscendence now has its own Internet site: www.soc.uu.se/research/gerontology/gerotrans
self in retrospect. The dimension of Social and Personal Relationships captures developmental changes in precisely these matters.

Please note that not everyone who has developed in the direction of gerotranscendence necessarily shows all these signs.

**THE COSMIC DIMENSION**

**Time and Childhood**

The definition of time is changed so that, for example, today and yesterday can be present at the same time. The borderline between now and then is transcended, and this may also include a return to and reconfiguration of childhood. Like the layers of an onion, all ages are available at the same time, but when returning to the inner layers, to childhood, things are observed that could not be seen then, and reinterpretations are made of events and situations from childhood or other earlier periods in life. Such reinterpretations frequently include some kind of reconciliation, as was the case for the old woman who had been mistreated by her mother as a child, and who now understood her troubled mother in a new way and was able to reconcile with her, 20 years after her death.

The transcendence of time can be so vivid that you feel you can have conversations with ancient philosophers, although you know it is impossible. This was the case for one of our informants. “When I was young,” the informant said, “Plato was hard to imagine as a living person, but as years have gone by, he has come alive and now I can discuss things with him – though I know it’s not possible.” Thus, if someone talks with delight about his or her conversations with Plato, we should perhaps refrain from automatically putting a “diagnosis” on this without inquiring into it more deeply.

In a representative Swedish postal survey (Tornstam, 2003), 52 percent of the 1,215 respondents in the age range 74–100 years agreed with the statement ‘Today (as compared to when I was 50) I feel that the distance between past and present is disappearing.’

**Connection to Earlier Generations**

An increased feeling of being part of the flow of generations. As one of the informants metaphorically put it: When I was young, I felt like an isolated lonely little spot in the universe, but nowadays I feel like a link in a generational chain, where the chain itself is the important thing, not me, just a single link. In the above-mentioned quantitative study (Tornstam, 2003), 61 percent agreed with the statement ‘Today (as compared to when 50) I feel a greater sense of belonging with both earlier and coming generations.’ Furthermore, 52 percent agreed with the statement ‘Today I feel to a higher
degree how unimportant an individual life is in comparison with the continuation of life as such.’

**Life and Death**

Based on the above-described change in perspective, from being an isolated point in the universe to part of a generational chain, we get a new way of comprehending what we have long known within gerontology—the seemingly contradictory fact that most people become less afraid of death as they get closer to it. This may have nothing to do with defense mechanisms, as has sometimes been suggested.

Here we also see very relaxed and sometimes intriguing ways of talking about life and death, like when one informant talked about how much she loves life and how much pleasure life gives, and at the same time explained that if she were to die tomorrow it would not matter! From the perspective of a young person, such a statement may signal that somebody is not mentally stable, but for the person who has transcended this duality, it may sound like wisdom. Transcendence of the life-death duality is also manifested by the fact that 68 percent of respondents 74–100 years of age agreed with the statement that ‘Today I feel that the border between life and death is less striking compared to when I was 50 years of age’ (Tornstam, 2003).

**Mystery of Life**

The mystery dimension of life is accepted. The intellectual restriction that everything in life must be explained within traditional scientific boundaries is transcended. As one informant explained, while in the midst of her academic career, she was obsessed with finding scientific explanations for everything, but gradually this obsession gave way to an acceptance of the notion that the human intellect may well have its limits.

This is reminiscent of Chinen’s (1989) analysis of the changing attitudes toward science expressed by two outstanding scientists: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Alfred North Whitehead. Both of them softened their views on science from a rather rigid and self-assured stance in their younger years, to a more pragmatic attitude in mid-life, and finally to a transcendent outlook in old age. They then both evidenced a radical transcendence of the borderlines between scientific disciplines as well as an acceptance of nonscientific explanations. To Chinen’s observations one could add other examples of well-known scientists who have developed in a similar way – Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Albert Einstein, and Niels Bohr, to name a few.

**Rejoicing**

From grand events to subtle experiences. The joy of experiencing the macrocosm through the microcosm materializes, often related to experiences
in nature, such as by experiencing a transcendence into the universe when looking at a flower. Also mentioned by several informants is how music has come to be experienced as a qualitatively new language, giving access to a new dimension of reality. In the aforementioned study (Tornstam, 2003) of Swedes in the age range 74–100 years, 28 percent agreed with the statement ‘Today I feel a greater mutual connection with the universe, compared to when I was 50 years of age.’

THE SELF

Self-Confrontation

Figuratively speaking, the individual looks back on himself at earlier phases in life and discovers hidden aspects of the self – both good and bad. This is quite close to what Jung (1930) referred to as one of the tasks in the second half of life, discovering the hidden aspects of the personality – the shadow. Some of our informants also reported that this is connected with a new awareness and reluctance to project one’s own dark sides on others. Sometimes the discovery can be quite joyful, as it was for one informant, who at age 80 discovered she had the gift to write such good poetry that she published her first book of poems at that age. I’ve lived most of my life without knowing about this gift, she explained.

Decrease in Self-Centeredness

The individual experiences a new awareness of the fact that he or she is not the center of the universe. In an illustrative interview, one male informant admitted with a laugh that during working life he really thought he was the most important person on earth and more or less the center of the universe. Now he admits with relief that he is not. His overly elevated self-esteem had taken on more realistic proportions.

However, if self-esteem was low from the beginning, it may instead be a question of struggling to establish a level of confidence that feels appropriate.

In the above-mentioned study (Tornstam, 2003) of Swedes 74–100 years of age, 73 percent agreed with the statement ‘Today I take myself less seriously than earlier.’

Body-Transcendence

A new awareness develops of how to take good care of the body without being obsessed with it. Female informants in particular talked about how an earlier obsession with the body and beauty has been replaced with pleasing acceptance, which has resulted in greater satisfaction with the body and appearance, as compared to when they were young.
Self-Transcendence

Looking back, the individual notices how the focus on one’s own needs has gradually been transcended and replaced with a focus on the needs of others – in particular the needs of children and grandchildren. Egoism has been overshadowed by altruism. The male informants in particular talked about this change.

Ego-Integrity

Here I have borrowed a concept from Erikson (1950), because what is described by gerotranscendent individuals is close but not identical to what Erikson called ego-integrity – when the individual achieves a fundamental acceptance of his/her own life, as a jigsaw puzzle finally coming together and forming a whole. Yes, the informants described a new sense of wholeness and coherence in life, but not necessarily a 100 percent good one. Using Ingrid Bergman’s metaphor might clarify the difference: “Getting old is like climbing a mountain; you get a little out of breath, but the view is much better!” Yes, you can see the wholeness of the view, and how the bad parts fit into this view, and even if you are a little out of breath it is stunning, and it gives a view not only of the individual past, but also of the sky and the mountains in the distance. The life lived is fitted into a new frame of reference. In Erikson’s theory, ego-integration primarily refers to an integration of the elements in the life that has passed. The individual reaches a fundamental acceptance of the life lived. In this way, the ego-integrity described by Erikson is more of a reverse integration process within the same definition of the world as before, while the process of gerotranscendence implies more of a forward or outward direction, including a redefinition of reality.

Social and Personal Relationships

Changed Meaning and Importance of Relations

The informants described how they have become more selective in their choice of company. The interest in participating in superficial kinds of socializing fades away. For example, informants told about how their earlier interest in mingling at cocktail parties has given way to being with a particular friend or staying at home contemplating. I have seen cases where the children of a person developing in this way have erroneously interpreted this development as a sign of depression. Part of this changed meaning and importance of relations is also the increased need for positive contemplative solitude, as was reported by most of our informants and confirmed in the quantitative studies.

In the above-mentioned study (Tornstam, 2003) of 74- to 100-year-old Swedes, 71 percent agreed with the statement ‘Today I am less interested in superficial social contacts’, and 65 percent agreed with the statement ‘Today I have more delight in my inner world, i.e., pondering, compared with when I was 50.’
Dealing with Role Playing in Life

The individual reaches an understanding of the difference between self and the roles played in life, sometimes feeling an urge to abandon and transcend roles in order to come closer to the genuine self, which may also be manifested as a new comforting understanding of why roleplaying has been necessary in life.

Emancipated Innocence

The individual develops a new skill to transcend needless conventions, norms and rules, which earlier in life had curtailed freedom to express the self. The individual who earlier in life was afraid to ask questions when listening to a lecture, now boldly asks them even if someone might laugh or think the question was stupid. Some individuals really make a game of their new emancipated innocence, like the woman who nowadays enjoys bicycling around with torn stockings and giggling, breaking the futile rule of not wearing torn stockings – a rule she was a captive of in younger days.

Another example is the old man who took part in a quite formal and ritual birthday dinner, and while waiting to be seated put his cocktail away, took his tuxedo jacket off and, crawling on hands and knees, followed the kids in under the long table – playing ‘follow-the-leader’.

Modern Asceticism

The emergence of a new understanding that the last part of the journey through life is easier and more joyful if one is carrying light luggage – if one has enough to meet the modern definition of the necessities of life, but no more. Some individuals start giving away things to children, grandchildren and others. In the above-mentioned Swedish mail survey (Tornstam, 2003), 81 percent of the respondents 74–100 years of age agreed with the statement ‘Today material things mean less, compared with when I was 50.’

Transcendent Everyday Wisdom

Being cocksure about right and wrong, good and bad, as in youth and sometimes even in midlife, gives way to an understanding that the answer is seldom that easy in reality. A reluctance to superficially separate right from wrong, and thus withholding from judgments and giving advice, is discerned. The transcendence of the right-wrong duality is accompanied by an increased broadmindedness and tolerance. In this perspective, the ‘stubborn’ cocksure old gaffer, when encountered on occasion, can be understood as an individual who has been hindered in his or her development.
ON AVERAGE, GEROTRANSCENDENCE DEVELOPS WITH AGE, AND SEEMS TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH INCREASED LIFE SATISFACTION

As the quantitative examples above show, significant proportions of individuals 74+ testify how they have changed and developed in the way described by gerotranscendence theory. A couple of studies, in which younger respondents were also included, can further illustrate this observation. One of these studies was a postal survey sent to a representative sample of 2,002 Swedes in the age range 20–85 years (Tornstam, 1997a), and the other a similar postal survey answered by 1,771 representative Swedes 65–104 years of age (Tornstam, 2003). The respondents in these studies had to read a number of statements, derived from earlier qualitative studies, and rate how poorly or well the statements agreed with their own experience. A factor analysis brought together the following statements in a coherent dimension that I called Cosmic Transcendence, because it was related more than anything else to the above-described dimension of the same name.

- I feel connected with the entire universe
- I feel that I am a part of everything alive
- I can feel a strong presence of people who are elsewhere
- Sometimes I feel like I live in the past and present simultaneously
- I feel a strong connection with earlier generations

Figure 2, which is compiled from the two above-mentioned studies, shows an average pattern with a gradual increase in transcendence, starting already in young adulthood. The graph also shows that women display more of this cosmic transcendence than men do, but this difference between men and women decreases with age and has disappeared in the age category 65–74 years. Those versed in quantitative methodology may object that the observed differences between age groups could be generational rather than developmental differences. However, when these quantitative data are interpreted in the light of what has been reported in the qualitative interviews, they suggest that we really are dealing with a developmental pattern.

Among the oldest respondents, those 85+, the difference between men and women has reappeared. The women, on average, continue the increase in gerotranscendence while the men seem to fall back slightly. How this should be explained is unclear, and I will leave that question for now and instead focus on the larger difference between men and women in the age category 25–44 years. Here it is revealed that this difference may have something to do with the positive developmental crisis that occurs for many women when they give birth to their first child. Childless women in fact have an age slope almost identical to that of men in Figure 2. Thus, giving birth to a child can for many women be seen as a developmental crisis that at the same time stimulates the development of cosmic transcendence. However, this developmental crisis is but one of the many crises that might stimulate the development of cosmic transcendence. This has been especially targeted in two of the postal surveys (Tornstam, 1997b, 2003) where the respondents were asked whether they had experienced something they themselves labeled a life crisis during the past two
years. This revealed a pattern in which “younger” respondents (up to around 55 years) who had experienced crises also scored higher on cosmic transcendence as compared to respondents who had not experienced any crises. It also showed that the transcendence boosting effect of crises was larger for women than for men. However, the older the respondent, the less significant this transcendence-boosting effect of crises. Among the oldest women, the degree of cosmic transcendence was the same (high) regardless of whether or not they had experienced crises during the past two years. Worded and generalized in another way, it is only when one is young that crises can boost transcendence somewhat. When one is older the development has occurred anyway.

Studies by other researchers have also revealed that with gerotranscendence comes more coherence and life satisfaction. Working in Holland, Braam, Braam, Bramsen, van Tilburg, van der Ploeg, & Deeg (2006) found a significant correlation between the Cosmic Transcendence dimension and the feeling of coherence and meaning in life. Among the 928 Dutch people in the age range 67–82 years, who answered the postal survey, a clear such correlation was found (r = .32, p < .001). It was also found that this correlation was somewhat stronger among women as compared to men, and among respondents 75+ as compared to younger ones.

From the US, Scarcello (2010) reported on a study of a special group of 50+ women – those who think life has become much better, not worse, after turning 50. Scarcello referred to these women as the Women of Harvest, who after the menopause enter the Open Fields on which old barriers and borderlines are transcended and wisdom harvested. It was first when her data collection was
finished and the content of the interviews organized, that she learned about gerotranscendence and was stunned by how well these Women of Harvest fitted into the description of gerotranscendence. It is also quite interesting that a gerontologist, the 80+ Professor Emeritus Edmund Sherman (2010, p.5), in his book *Contemplative Aging: A Way of Being in Later Life*, confessed that ‘... many of the things my colleagues and I have written about later life, based on the “objective” findings of gerontological research and practice, feel different when experienced personally.

From Japan, Nakagawa (2007) reported on the use of an adapted Japanese gerotranscendence scale, where the degree of gerotranscendence on average increases with age, but where the expected correlation with life satisfaction does not appear in the small sample (n = 133). Nakagawa (2008) also reported that in Japan, as in Sweden, there are many individuals who recognize themselves in the theory of gerotranscendence as well as individuals who do not.

From Taiwan, Ling Yu (2008) reported on a study showing that gerotranscendence correlated with life satisfaction and religiosity.

It is striking how many old people react with recognition and relief when they learn about gerotranscendence. They have noticed the development within, but at the same time seen how this clashes with the expectation that they should be the same person as in midlife. In August 2010, The New York Times Health Blog (http://newoldage.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/30/appreciating-the-peculiar-virtues-of-old-age/#more-4877) posted an article about gerotranscendence, and it is striking how many of the reader comments included this element of recognition and relief. Moreover, after learning about gerotranscendence, professionals working with and among old people often have “aha” experiences that allow them to understand specific old persons.

**DISCUSSION AND BEYOND**

Quantitatively the average level of gerotranscendence, as measured in various studies (Tornstam, 1994, 1997a, b, 1999, 2003), correlates positively with age, but within this correlation it is still a fact that far from everyone reaches high levels of gerotranscendence. A rough estimate may be that only 20 percent of the population automatically reaches high degrees of gerotranscendence without trouble. It seems that, for many of us, the process is slowed down or blocked for various reasons. One of these reasons is the expectations many of us hold, that aging should involve a continuation of the same values, interests and activities as in midlife, just as many professionals working with elderly also believe.

But, what happens with those of us who are stopped, or stop ourselves, in the process of growing old – i.e., who are stopped in the developmental process? Jung (1930), who challenged the psychology of his time by stating that maturation is a lifelong process, maintained that, in our part of the world, it is
a tragedy that many of us live our entire lives with the erroneous idea that it is only during the first half of life that we develop and mature. Practicing such a way of life ends up in our dying as only half-matured individuals. Then, according to Jung, we develop psychiatric symptoms including depression, anxiety, fear of death, disgust and a feeling that life has been stolen from us. For some, suicide becomes the final escape from this.

It may be worthwhile to open up the discussion and consider the idea that some old people who really are suffering from, for example, anxiety and depression may not be suffering as a consequence of retirement, loneliness or old age as such, but rather as a result of being hindered or hindering themselves in their developmental process. Thinking this way allows us to use the theory of gerotranscendence as a basis for therapeutic efforts of various kinds. From Taiwan, Yun-Hsuan (2008) reported on a successful method of basing counseling of old persons in institutions on gerotranscendence theory. He found that those who discussed gerotranscendence in group sessions experienced reduced depression levels and instead reached higher levels of life satisfaction, as compared to a control group in which other matters were discussed. A similar type of experiment in Sweden was reported by Pevik-Fasth (2009). Here, a group of non-institutionalized men and women in the age range 80–90 years met 12 times during a 6-month period and discussed life development issues under the guidance of Pevik-Fasth, who is a professional therapist. Evaluation of the intervention showed that some of the participants recognized themselves in part of the gerotranscendence developmental pattern already from the start and were stimulated to take further steps in the same direction, while others discovered new possibilities for personal development and would gladly allow themselves to move in this direction. As a professional therapist, Pevik-Fasth anticipated that life development issues might evoke anxiety in some of the participants, and was prepared to handle this. Although none of the participants exhibited any anxiety, it is advisable to be prepared to handle such issues when starting group discussions of this kind.

A less invasive way of using the theory of gerotranscendence is to make staff members aware of this developmental possibility and of how to behave so as not to misinterpret or block care recipients who exhibit signs of gerotranscendent development. Wadensten (2003, 2007a,b,c) has translated the theory into guidelines for staff members. The Preamble of these guidelines is to accept signs of gerotranscendence as possibly normal signs of the aging process. Examples of other guidelines are:

- Understand and respect that older people can have a different perception of time, such that the boundaries between past, present and future are transcended.
- Do encourage the older person to recall and talk about childhood and old times, and how they have developed during life.
- Do let older people decide for themselves whether they want to be alone or participate in “activities.”
- Do not always start a conversation with a routine health question like “how do you feel today.” In the morning you can instead ask what
dreams the old person has had, and start a discussion about what message might be inherent in the dream.

**Personal Reflections**

Yet to develop and explore, are exercises for individual contemplative use. In my book *Gerotranscendence* (Tornstam, 2005), I give some advice on how it might be possible to derive such exercises from the theory. For my own purposes, I have found it quite a pleasure to use the three transpersonal exercises below:

**The Time and Place Exercise**

Pick out a philosopher, novelist, playwright, or composer from the past who has made an impression on you and imagine that you are living at the same time, and are present in the same room. Imagine that you have a discussion with this person. Try to transcend the feeling that this is an exercise and evoke the feeling that you really are living simultaneously. Try to discover what feelings and opinions you have in common. How does this exercise affect you?

**The Generation Chain Exercise**

Try to imagine that your individuality is part of something larger. You are not an isolated individual but part of a chain of human beings with many more commonalities than differences. Try to visualize an infinite genetic chain to which you belong. Try to understand that within this genetic chain you have eternal life. Feel the peace that comes with this insight.

**Being a Flower**

Go outdoors and find a beautiful flower you like. Concentrate on the flower and contemplate the fact that you and the flower are made of the very same basic molecular components. Try to comprehend that this means the flower is part of you, and you are part of the flower, at the same time as both you and the flower are parts of the universe. Try to feel how the separateness of you and the flower is transcended and replaced with a feeling of a wholeness and togetherness. You and the flower are the same. Experience the joy and pleasure of this comprehension.

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The Author

*Lars Tornstam*, Ph.D., a sociologist by education, has a major interest in the field of gerontology, within research, education and social policy. At the Uppsala University he defended the first Swedish thesis within the field of gerontological sociology in the year 1973. At the same university he also, in the year 1975, started the first Swedish academic courses in gerontology. In 2006 he was awarded by the Swedish journal *Äldreomsorg [Old Age Care]* with a so called Value Ground Award for important contributions to a more balanced view on aged people and aging, and for his theory of gerotranscendence. In 2006 he also was awarded by the Swedish Gerontological Society with the 2006 Great Gerontology Award for his outstanding contributions to gerontological research.

An informal and amusing appreciation has been shown by author Jaki Scarcello, who wittingly places Lars Tornstam in a Rogues Gallery, together with celebrities like Carl Jung, Joan Erikson and Betty Friedan, who boldly told their stories despite condemning or deaf contemporaries.
DREAMS AND THE COMING OF AGE

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ABSTRACT: Our dream life can offer clues about what “conscious aging” might promise for the second half of life. Psychology has focused chiefly on the first half of life, while gerontology has largely looked at decline instead of positive dimensions of age, such as wisdom or intergenerational solidarity. When we consider dreams about aging, we can distinguish between an “Elder Ego” anticipating contingencies of later life and the “Elder Ideal” expressing aspirations toward positive aging. Some dreams reflect the polarity of ego-integrity versus despair (Erikson), while others express an ideal of affirmative disengagement or “gerotranscendence” (Tornstam). Jung’s idea of individuation remains an important touchstone for identifying dreams that can offer guidance for growth in the second half of life.

It has been said that “In our dreams we are always young.” But this is true only as long as we fail to look beneath the surface of our dreams. Our dream life can offer us compelling clues about what “conscious aging” might promise for the second half of life. Psychology for the most part has focused chiefly on the first half of life, while gerontology has largely focused on decline instead of positive images of age (Biggs, 1999). Among dream researchers later life has not been a focus of attention, although the small empirical literature on this subject does offer hints for what to look for (Kramer, 2006). Here I consider dreams about aging, offering suggestions for how our dream life can give directions for a more positive vision of the second half of life.

ELDER EGO AND ELDER IDEAL

Our wider culture offers contrasting versions of the self in later life, what I will call here the “Elder Ego.” On the one hand, we have images of vulnerable, decrepit elders—the “ill-derly,” images all too prevalent in media dominated by youth culture. On the other hand, we have an image of so-called Successful Aging, which often seems to be nothing more than an extension of youth or midlife: the “well-derly.” These opposing images—the ‘ill-derly’ and the “well-derly” populate our dream life as they do our waking world.

Yet these are not the only images of the Elder Ego. There is also an archetypal figure Jung called the Wise Old Man (Senex) and Wise Old Woman (Hubback, 1996). Think of Gandalf in The Lord of the Rings or Obi Wan Kenobi in “Star Wars.” Think of Merlin in King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table (von Franz, 1998). As guide figures, the Wise Old Man or Wise Old Woman may appear in dreams in periods of confusion or uncertainty, especially at
times when we need help in decision-making. Carl Jung spoke of the wise old man as an “archetype of the spirit” and the “speaking fountainhead of the soul.” Dreaming about the Wise Old Man can express aspiration toward awareness of larger meaning in later life.

This image of the Elder Ideal is needed by both older and younger generations. All over the world we find this repeated pairing of the young hero with the Wise Elder. For example, in Greek mythology, Apollo was matched with Poseidon, together representing the opposites of youth and age, polar opposites but also complementary. In the Hebrew Bible we find Joshua and Moses; in Roman mythology, Aeneas and the Sybil of Cumae; and in Gaelic myths of ancient Ireland there is Cuchulain and Skatha the Wise. Beyond the Western world, in Hindu mythology we find young king Rama meeting the old hermit Agastya. A similar process appears in fairy tales (Chinen, 1989). In “elder tales” we see the decline in later life, but also the hope of psychological and spiritual growth, just as we see in dreams.

Different images of the Elder Ego appear in dreams at different stages in life, as we see in the following example (Luke, 2000, p. 247). The dreamer is Lisa Van Susteren, 52, a psychiatrist:

**Coming up Clear**

_In her dream, the dreamer] is coming up through the water from the bottom of a river. The water is clear. But on her body are leaves and mud. Clear water, encrusted body._

The dreamer in this case recognized that the image of dead, fallen leaves heralds the end of her long hot summer of middle age: that is, the ending of one phase of life and the beginning of another, the coming of age. There is a saying that fifty is the old age of youth, and the youth of old age. Now in her early Fifties, this dreamer is already beginning actively, if unconsciously, to enter into dialogue with the Elder Ego within herself. The Elder Ego here includes both negative and positive dimensions: on the one hand, leaves and mud encrusting the body; on the other hand, clear water, symbolizing purification and nurturance. It is natural for us to encounter negative images of age since our culture reminds of that unceasingly. But a positive image of age, the Elder Ideal, is represented by clear water, the promise of new growth in later life.

At times the Elder Ego makes itself felt in the smallest of ways in dreams, announcing its presence in a subtle fashion. Robert Langs (Langs, 1988, pp. 71–72) cites the case of Priscilla, a woman in her mid-forties who reported a very short dream in which _she is throwing away some spoiled prunes_. That was the entire dream remembered by this dreamer. What could such a dream signify?

The dreamer’s initial association to this dream was to her own aging: she had started to notice wrinkles on her face, like wrinkles of a prune. Priscilla also reported that she had begun to worry about the possibility that her elderly aunt
was developing symptoms of Alzheimer’s Disease. These associations led the dreamer to recognize that she had become more and more concerned with her own aging body: with lines around the mouth, joint pains after exercise, putting on weight, and so on. This very short dream and its intimations of coming of age in her body enabled the dreamer to work through some of these issues, to a point where six weeks later she had another dream in which she had been chosen “Mrs. Universe,” a symbol of celebrated youthfulness.

It is not unusual for people to have such dream intimations of aging at significant moments of life: for example, on a birthday. Concerning such dreams, we can say, along with the Freudian psychologist Charles Rycroft (1979, p. xi.), that such dreams indicate “the existence of some mental entity which is more preoccupied with the individual’s total life span and destiny than is the conscious ego with its day-to-day involvement with immediate contingencies, and which not uncommonly encounters blank incomprehension from an ego which is unprepared to admit that its conception of itself may be incomplete and misguided.”

Patricia Garfield tells of a middle-aged American woman who dreamed about a couple who visited her at home for dinner (Garfield, 2001, p. 99). When they left, they towed her whole house away, leaving the dreamer in frustration and anger. Still later, she dreamed that this same thieving couple had completely destroyed her house, burning it to ashes. This middle-aged woman was fully conscious that her house dream was actually about her own aging, including a feeling that her youth had somehow been “stolen.”

Edwin Edinger (2002, p. 109) discusses the case of one of his therapy patients, a woman in her fifties who had lost some of the energy of youth but was unable to accept the challenges of the second half of life. After two years of therapy she began having dreams about long trips or ocean journeys to unfamiliar places. Then she had the following dream:

**Eclipse**

_She and her sister were returning to the town in which she had spent her childhood. They knew they were on the right road but abruptly it came to an end in a field. Down the hill and to the left she recognized her home town. As she went downhill, the sky darkened until it seemed to be night, although it was only nine-thirty in the morning. The dreamer was terribly frightened but attempted to reassure herself by saying, ‘It must be an eclipse; it will pass. I will hold on and not be afraid.’_

“Eclipse” is a dream about a journey to an unfamiliar place: namely the town of the dreamer’s childhood, the place of her youth. This dreamer is carrying into the second half of life the same attitude she had previously, so she is convinced she is “on the right road.” Following “Eclipse” this dreamer had no further dreams about journeys but instead began having a series of dreams of
giving birth, although without any clear sign of success. Later she had the following dream (Edinger, 2002, p. 111):

**The Gift of Time**

_She was given a gift from an eminent doctor, a man who at one time had awakened her out of years of torpor, and with whom she had fallen in love. The gift consisted of a round plastic bag containing everything necessary for life, including Time. Time was represented by an umbilical cord in a circle which surrounded the bag._

The “years of torpor” are, again, an expression of the dreamer’s attitude toward the second half of life: decline, boredom, emptiness. Note that the round bag contains “everything necessary for life.” Extended longevity, the gift of time, is part of this gift, represented in this dream by an umbilical cord wrapped in a circle. Here too is a powerful archetypal image of time as a circle rather than a line.

The umbilical cord is what connects the dreamer to this Eternal Now, to Eternity beyond time. The last dream in the series cited by Edinger suggests a degree of completeness or totality (Edinger, 2002, p. 112): “The dreamer saw the plan of her life being woven from bands into a large mat. Each band had a distinct and highly important meaning.” This archetypal dream invites us to ponder the question: “What is the real gift of time?” Does extended longevity, the great achievement of modern society, represent a new possibility for growth? Or will it be merely an extension of torpor and decline?

Anxieties about age are never far away. Karen Signell (1990, p. 66) reports the dream of Lorraine, who had entered psychotherapy with strong fears about growing older: she wondered, would she become “an old hag” or even a bag lady? As Signell notes, such fears about old age often revive fears of abandonment and neglect experienced in childhood. Here is Lorraine’s dream about the coming of age:

**The Bountiful Old Woman**

_I was with an old woman—gray, dowdy, frumpy. She opened her closet and showed me her beautiful fabrics and beads. They were all different shades and colors. They were beautiful! I asked her why she didn’t use them herself. She said, ‘Because I’m going to give them to you.’ I asked her, ‘Are you sure that you want me to have them?’ She said, ‘Yes, I want you to have them.’ But I wasn’t sure that I’d take them. I wasn’t sure I’d know how to use them._

Karen Signell relates Lorraine’s dream to the story of Cinderella, neglected by her stepmother but offered beautiful garments by a fairy godmother, the helper figure who could magically transform her life. In the original Cinderella story, the heroine waits with longing for her prince, then meets him for a single
evening only to lose him after the witching hour. In the original fairy tale the prince ultimately finds Cinderella once more and the two of them live “happily ever after.” But, as Alan Chinen put it, the big question for the second half of life is: What happens after Cinderella finally gets married to the prince? Will this marriage last? Is there hope for genuine psychological growth “in the ever after?”

In her dream Lorraine was offered beautiful gifts, like Cinderella. But the dreamer could not believe her good fortune: after all, how could a “gray, dowdy, frumpy” old woman offer her anything of value? This skepticism, after all, represents the collective dilemma of our culture in its worship of youth. Age may offer gifts, but each of us, like Lorraine, is uncertain about accepting the gifts, because, in the dreamer’s words, “I wasn’t sure I’d know how to use them.”

We do not know how to use the gifts of age because, as a culture, we lack guidance for growth in the second half of life. Yet our dreams send messages that promise something to us, as the dream of “The Bountiful Old Woman” has promised gifts to Lorraine. Jung put the matter well when he wrote: “A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life’s morning.” (Jung, 19171 p. 17).

Dreams about the coming of age do not come only to those who are beyond midlife. On the contrary, in world mythology, as we have seen, we find repeated pairing between the young hero and a hero who represents the Elder Ideal. The following is the dream of a young man who was seeking direction in his life (Krippner, Bogzaran, & de Carvalho, 2002, p. 5). He had gone alone to camp on Mt. Shasta in California where he was preparing to practice nightly “dream incubation,” a custom familiar to the ancient Greeks and revived by some as a modern ritual (Reed, 1976; Tick & Larsen, 2001). On the fifth night on the mountaintop he had the following dream:

**The Old Men in the Cave**

*I am in a cave with a group of old men. They are drinking water from an old bowl that is being passed around. As the bowl comes closer towards me I realize that this must be a dream. An old man with dark skin and dark hair sitting next to me hands me the bowl. I take it and drink the water. I suddenly hear a humming sound and as I look up the men have disappeared and a beautiful white deer is walking in the light in the far distance. I awake feeling ecstatic.*

This young man considered his lucid dream to be an initiatory experience. Apart from the dreamer’s individual psychological associations, there are features of this dream that are important for understanding the place of dreams over the life-course. In many respects, “The Old Men in the Cave” is a dream about initiation during youth. The dreamer goes alone out into the wilderness, as would often be the custom for a Native American shaman seeking dream
initiation (Wallace, 1958). Among the Plains Indian the dream was treated as a significant event, occurring on different planes of reality. Thus, among such groups the “vision quest” was also known as “crying for a dream” among the Lakota (Devereux, 1969). Among the Iroquois it was understood that the spirit world could communicate with individuals through these “Big Dreams.” A Big Dream could be a healing for the whole community, conveying revelations or warnings to be heeded.

The young man who dreamed “The Old Men in the Cave” was not a Native American shaman. Yet his dream quest was a passage into the unknown world of a cave, to discover something wild and untamed. Caves symbolize what is deepest and oldest in the psyche. The oldest art works of humanity—the cave art at Lascaux—are cave drawings from our remote ancestors. Cave dwelling evokes a primordial condition which can be understood as the context for this dream. The dreamer at first is not alone in this cave but is with a group of old men, as if to suggest that the process of initiation itself is a connection between youth and age. As in the ritual of the Eucharist, in “The Old Men in the Cave” a bowl is passed around and, just as the dreamer is about the drink, the dream becomes lucid. The image of an old man with “dark skin” and “dark hair” suggests an element of darkness or shadow belonging to the dreamer, who has now drunk from the initiatic bowl. From that moment on the old men in the dream disappear and the dreamer is once again alone. The circle of aloneness is complete.

The cave drawings at Lascaux depict magical animals and in “The Old Men in the Cave” the dreamer now sees another magical animal: the “white deer walking in the light in the far distance.” This vision of an illuminated animal symbolizes the distance this dreamer has already traveled and must still travel in the process of initiation. The dreamer has now been granted a holy vision and he wakes up ecstatic. The word ek-stasis, in Greek means, literally, “standing outside oneself,” as this dreamer has gone outside himself.

“The Old Men in the Cave” is the dream of a young man seeking guidance. But where can youth find guidance today? As the poet Robert Bly has argued, our society today is one where age is devalued, leaving young people adrift (Bly, 1997). It is not surprising that young people crave some kind of initiation or viable path into adulthood. Because we lack any journey into the wilderness, or a genuine ritual for reconciling aloneness with society, we end up forcing young people to behave in ways disconnected from the adult world and from the self they might become. The image of the elders in “The Old Men in the Cave” expresses a longing for such guidance and direction in life, but that longing too often remains unfulfilled.

This challenge of initiation is not limited to young people. At every transitional or “liminal” stage of life we need guidance. So we turn to stories, myths, fairy tales or other symbolic statements that respond to our hunger for a “rite of passage” helping us move through the stages of life. Dreams with initiatory symbolism may appear at critical or transitional points in the life course, such as, marriage, death of a parent, and moving into retirement. When it comes to offering initiatory symbols or experience, our culture remains impoverished.
Thomas Moore has described our impoverished condition as a lack of “soul.” As Moore understands the problem, “soul” is not strictly a religious term but rather “a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance.” Moore tells of a case in his therapy work of a young woman in distress, with ambivalence about being a woman. She was going on binges and vomiting, displaying distressing psychological problems in her relationship to food. Then one day she brought to Moore the following dream (Moore, 1994, 11):

**Old Women and the Stew Pots**

* A group of elderly women were preparing a feast outdoors. They were stewing a great variety of food in huge pots over fires. The dreamer was invited to join the cooking and become one of the women. She bristled at first—she didn’t want to be identified with those old gray women in peasant black dresses—but finally joined them.

This dream, like “The Old Men in the Cave,” presents an image of an Elder Ideal, promising the “fulfillment of soul” craved unconsciously by a young person. Moore suggests that the dream of the old women and the stew pots served to confront this dreamer with something she was deeply afraid of: namely, her own deep feminine nature. Like “The Old Men in the Cave” the dream of “Old Women and the Stew Pots” conveys something of the quality of initiation into a mystery, in this case with activities clearly related to the dreamer’s ambivalence about food.

There are also powerful dreams where the image of the Elder Ideal shows itself in decisive terms, as in the following dream of 45-year old Brugh Joy (Joy, 1990, p. 156):

**Embracing the Elder**

* I am facing a deep, dark pool of water. Slowly, from its depths, rises the body of a man. At first, he is floating face-down and seems to be dead. He then becomes animated and I see that he is actually a healthy older man in his seventies or eighties. He stands on the water’s surface, smiles, and embraces me as I smile and embrace him.

Brugh Joy interpreted this dream as the birth of awareness of the “Elder within,” related to the image of Christ walking on the water. In this case the water symbolizes the unconscious level of the self which supports the Elder who is the dreamer’s own future self.

Brugh Joy writes: “Elderhood is the shadow side of incapacitating old age. In the concluding phase of our life cycle, Elderhood brings us to the threshold of a mystery as profound as that of birth and procreation… the mystery of death and personal dissolution.” He continues: “Elders till and prepare the soil of the...
younger generations, guiding them into a successful relationship with Life and with Death. Elders are the sculptors and the guardians of culture and civilization. They are the great teachers of life, second only to the Master Teacher, which is Life itself” (p. 156).

Jung points to a report (Jung, 1970, cited by Joy, 1990, p. 31) in the ethnological literature about a Native American warrior chief “to whom in middle life the Great Spirit appeared in a dream. The spirit announced to him that from then on he must sit among the women and children, wear women’s clothes, and eat the food of women. He obeyed the dream without suffering a loss of prestige.”

Ultimately, the task of development in the second half of life is to bring together the Elder Ideal with the energy of youth, or what Jungians call the archetypes of the Senex and the Puer (Hillman, 1970). We need to pursue this developmental task collectively but also as individuals. To fulfill the task requires that we pay respect to the virtues of solitude and inwardness, but such veneration is not easy in our contemporary world. On the contrary, in contemporary society, with its emphasis on speed, energy, and outwardness, we are living a world which celebrates the archetype of the puer aeternus, or “eternal boy.” Think of the popularity of botox or plastic surgery, the celebration of youth in media and advertising: James Hillman put the same point slightly differently, when he remarked that we live in a hyperactive society, where anything less than mania is considered depression.

Whether rejected by the wider culture, or repressed by those who cultivate speed and “anti-aging medicine,” age will have come back, as the “return of the repressed,” in our dreams. Psychotherapist David Gordon (2007 p. 6) describes one of his clients, Beth, whose life was filled with distraction until one day she had a fateful dream. In her dream Beth found herself in a room with old telephone switchboards connected with lines and plugs. Then, at a certain point, workers came in to tear up all the equipment and cut all the phone lines. Beth woke up with her heart pounding, deeply afraid. Later she had another dream:

In the Backyard

*I find that an old crone and young woman are living in my back yard and I start to think how I can get them out into the world so they can have more support because they must be lonely— then I realize that to learn from each other, they need to be left alone.*

Beth had reflected on her telephone switchboard dream, which symbolized her own distracted life. Her second dream takes place in the “back yard” of her own psyche, not the front yard where she faces the world in all its distractions and busy-ness. In this backyard, she finds the two images of youth and age. Her initial impulse is to bring them out in to the world, to imagine that they must be lonely, which is often the way we think of old age. Beth’s progress in therapy is reflected in her eventual realization that youth and age can only
learn from each other by being “left alone:” that is, kept apart from the distractions that prevent genuine growth.

Lewis Richmond, a Buddhist meditation teacher, tells of a woman in her fifties who recently told him about a dream she had (Richmond, 2009):

**The Candle Flame**

_In the dream she was at a party and saw a tall, attractive man in his early thirties standing alone with a drink in his hand. The woman went over to talk to the man; in the dream she was young again and single, and this situation meant a possible romantic opportunity. With a winning smile, she tried to engage the man in conversation, only to find that his gaze had alighted elsewhere, and with a curt nod and a polite smile, the man excused himself and moved away. The scene shifted and the woman found herself in the bathroom, looking at her fifties face in the mirror. She started to cry._

Lewis Richmond comments on the dream as follows: “There is a part of us that ages–our body, primarily–and a part that does not. The part that does not age has something to do with the mind, but it is not the mind as we usually think of it; our mental faculties of memory and concentration begin to slowly subside with age just as the body does. But our primary or innate awareness, our feeling of being alive, of just being here, does not age.” He compares this primary awareness to a candle flame that puts out steady light, no matter whether the candle is new or used up. It is the flame that represents our true inner consciousness or innate awareness, which does not age.

**GEROTRANSCENDENCE, CREATIVE AGING, EGO INTEGRITY VERSUS DESPAIR, AND THE JOURNEY INTO OLD AGE**

The struggle between positive and negative sides of the Elder Ego appears repeatedly in dreams. The following dream is from one of psychotherapist June Singer’s patients (Singer, 1990, pp. 26–27), here called “Laurel:”

**Geotranscendence**

_The Big Aquarium. There is a big aquarium in the house of some very ordinary people, and also a small aquarium that has some defect in it. It is necessary to transfer the fish from the small to the large aquarium, or else they will die because the small aquarium is gradually losing water. The big aquarium is self-sustaining, as it has a system that aerates and filters the water and plants and there are secluded places in it for the fish to breed in._

Laurel’s dream depicts aging as decline. In fact, Singer reported that Laurel’s associations with this dream were a sense of the small world of the small aquarium gradually running down, “the way people lose energy when they get
old.” The dreamer herself even mentioned the second law of thermodynamics, or the tendency of physical systems toward greater disorder and entropy. By contrast, the second, larger aquarium seemed to this patient to suggest generativity and hope. From Laurel’s point of view, we are confronted with a complete dichotomy between the “ill-derly” and the “well-derly,” between negative and positive images of age.

Singer herself interprets the small aquarium as a metaphor for the visible world. But we can also understand the symbolism of the dream in terms of lifespan development. In the first half of life, we establish a firm sense of ego identity and mastery in the world. In doing so, we adapt to the world, and so our “house” or sense of self belongs to “ordinary people,” as in the aquarium dream. The fish in this patient’s dream represent those living elements in us that need to survive and grow. But the “small aquarium” established in the first half of life will not permit this growth: aging means that this aquarium is “gradually losing water.”

What is needed in the second half of life is a shift toward what can be called “Conscious Aging,” here represented by the second, larger aquarium. In contrast to the sense of a bounded ego, the larger aquarium is described here as “self-sustaining;” the aquarium is constantly cleansed and regenerated. More important, there are “there are secluded places in it for the fish to breed in,” an intimation of our connection to future generations. The aquarium, in short, is a symbol for a transpersonal dimension of the Self, something evoked for this dreamer, even a movement toward “Conscious Aging.” What is required for Conscious Aging is a degree of disengagement (“seclusion”) so that new life can emerge. In quietness or contemplative space, it may be possible for the fish to breed: in short, for real being to develop in the second half of life.

**Creative Aging**

Dream life can be a time of creativity and creative activity can extend into later life, as Gene Cohen has documented. There has been little study of creativity in dreams and dreaming in the later years. One of the most important contributions to our understanding of dreams in later life has come from Swiss researchers led by Arthur Funkhauser and his colleagues (Funkhauser, Hirsbrunner, Cornu, & Bahro, 1999, 2000), who confirm that the frequency of recalling dreams seems to decline with age. The largest decrease happens in early middle age and is therefore unlikely to be connected with aging effects.

Funkhauser and colleagues observe that persons in extreme old age often feel as if they can contribute little to the world around them. Persons towards the end of their lives, whether through old age or incapacitation, often feel they have little left which they can contribute to the world around them. Yet, despite frailty, those in advanced age may still retain memories of what they have been dreaming and the message from their dreams can contribute to a sense of integrity in later life. In short, the inner dimension of dreams may prove a valued compensation for outer losses. Once we see this connection, it
may open new possibilities for creative aging, as George Bouklas (Bouklas, 1997) has shown in his study of psychotherapy among the oldest-old.

The initial challenge of age may be the need to let go, as we see in this dream of the noted psychologist Robert Johnson (Johnson & Ruhl, 2007, pp. 159–160) at age 83:

Zero Point. I drive to San Francisco in my old Volkswagen Beetle. I park it. Then I forget where I have parked it and, though I can’t find my car, I have to go home again. I walk till I am exhausted. I’m feeling desperate, then I find my wallet is gone; I remember a friend in San Francisco had a wallet stolen, and he ended up at a Bank of America branch, which is also my bank. He had no identification or money, not even change to phone someone for assistance. He got help when they phoned back his branch and verified that he had an account and then gave him a couple of hundred dollars, which pleased me greatly in my dream. So in the dream I thought, ‘If I can just find a Bank of America, they will bail me out from this difficulty.’ I begin walking again. I cannot find a branch of Bank of America (though, in outer reality, there are many in San Francisco). Finally I am completely stuck, and from that stuck or zero point I suddenly realize the basic life principle that I am exactly where I belong, that I don’t really need anything, not a car, not the Bank of America. I realize this with great relief and joy.

This dream begins with a moment dreaded by so many older people: forgetting the location of your car. But Robert Johnson’s problems in this dream only multiply when he loses his wallet: his source of identity. Magical thinking comes to the rescue in the fantasy that the Bank of America will “bail him out,” but he cannot even find a branch of that ubiquitous institution. It is the final confirmation that the dreamer, facing his own aging, is truly lost, at a “zero point,” which gives him the insight he needed: he is exactly where he belongs. The final emotions of the dream are relief and joy at this recovery of his true identity, despite the process of disengagement documented in the dream.

Johnson tells us that later that same night he another dream (Johnson & Ruhl, 2007, p. 160). This time he was in a medieval city where he is trying to find his way out. But every street in this city was leading him right back where he started. His search continues but he always ends up at the same point until, in exhaustion, he surrenders and realizes that “all streets go both directions simultaneously and always take you back where you started.” This, he finally understands, “is the nature of reality.” Johnson had been struggling for months with pairs of opposites and also with recognition that the world around him was deteriorating: an experience of disillusionment not unusual among older people. In the months leading up to this dream he had greatly reduced his lecture schedule. In his outer life, as in the dream “Zero Point,” Robert Johnson had been intentionally going through a process of disengagement, but he did not find it easy: “I needed to stop fighting both the inner and outer process including the limitations, of growing old.” In both dreams he needed to reach a point of exhausting alternatives: “Only at the point of exhaustion did a revelation set in and the totally irrational conclusion was reached that this is wonderful! Was I gaining some piece of enlightenment in my declining years?” (p. 160)
The poet Rilke once spoke of the dread of dying “with unlived lines in my body” and this fear, Johnson believes, is evident in the dreams he had and in his own struggle with disengagement. The Theory of Disengagement in gerontology was developed in the 1960s to acknowledge the way in which both individuals and society gradually encouraged older people to withdraw from the world around them, not only through retirement but through a changing attitude, a separation or distancing from others (Cumming & Henry, 1961). Disengagement Theory was later roundly denounced by many gerontologists, who instead favored what they termed Activity Theory: the idea that older people would be better off if they continued to be engaged through work, hobbies, social ties, and so on (Hochschild, 1975). Proponents of Activity Theory, however, missed something important about the idea of disengagement: namely, a spiritual or contemplative dimension, the way in which disengagement could truly be a hint of enlightenment in one’s declining years, as Robert Johnson phrased it. Eventually, Swedish gerontologist Lars Tornstam would emphasize an ideal of positive disengagement, which became the basis of gero-transcendence (Tornstam, 1989).

But the true creativity of later life demands not only letting go but a discovery of something positive, as we saw in the dream “The Big Aquarium.” The positive vision is given to Robert Johnson in second dream, set in a medieval city, symbolic of a place far remote in time, just like that “place” in us from which we can find a positive approach to aging. But again, until exhaustion sets in, the dreamer could not recognize this truth. The streets of the city are to the dreamer like a maze until he realizes, as Lao Tzu put, that the way up and the way down are one and the same. This insight into the nature of reality is beyond the understanding of the rational mind, preoccupied, as Johnson was, with opposites and dualism. But in the world of dreams, opposites are unified in a positive vision of creative aging.

The following is the dream (von Franz, 1997, p. 341) of a 60-year old woman, a dream which preceded a remarkable burst of intellectual creativity:

A New Landscape. I see a landscape in darkened light, and in the background the crest of a hill sloping gently upward and then continuing on the same level. On the rising line of the horizon moves a square pane that shines like gold. In the foreground is dark, unplowed earth, which is beginning to sprout. Then suddenly I see a round table with a gray stone slab top. At the moment I become aware of the table, the gold-gleaming square pane is on it. It has disappeared from the hill. Why and how it suddenly changed location, I don’t know.

What is the meaning of this darkened landscape? Marie-Louise von Franz suggests that the darkened light here means that the brightness of day has now diminished. This darkening could mean different things. One the one hand, it could mean a loss of sensory of physical powers with advancing age. But a loss can also be a gain. The darkening of the landscape can be a conscious movement into the experience of age and a “descent” into the underworld of the unconscious. In fact, this dreamer had long been making efforts to document and understand her dreams. In the imagery of “A New Landscape” there is a contrast between
different geometric images: a square pane and a round table. Both images come together (circle-in-the-square) symbolize a more complete “coming together” in the total Self. Von Franz alludes to the “round table” that was the customary meeting place of King Arthur and his knights. The Knights of the Round Table were more than just adventurers in chivalry. They were agents in a quest for the Holy Grail, a symbol for the completed self, for new growth. In this dream the earth the unplowed earth “is beginning to sprout,” like the soil in us that could bring forth new growth. The square pane on the horizon “shines like gold,” suggesting the possibility of something precious (gold) that appears in unexpected places. Could age itself be a time for new growth of something previous?

The following is a dream of a 75-year old woman, a teacher, whose life in old age displayed joy and productivity (Koch-Sheras, Hollier, & Jones, 1983). Then she had the following dream:

No Bed, Only Standing Room. A young student of mine has won a contest with the finals to be held in Chicago. She asks that I make her reservations. I call and do so. I am told they will have no bed, only standing room. I try to call again, but the alarm wakes me up. (p. 217)

In this case, the dreamer understood the message of the dream: “This dream reminds me that I don’t need to feel so old that I need to take to bed. I don’t feel old—I have to look in the mirror sometimes and see my wrinkles to remember” (p. 217). The dreamer is a teacher and in her dream there appears one of her young students, the promise of life in the future. But the teacher herself is still needed (“I make her reservations”) and her life is far from over. Like the elderly couple in “The Shining Fish,” the dreamer has found a deep connection with her own creativity and with future generations.

Ego-Integrity versus Despair

Erik Erikson understood the psychological task of later life as a struggle between ego-integrity and despair. A key point to remember is that, for many older people, the natural disillusionment of life can too easily give way to complete loss of hope, as in the following dream of a widow in her late seventies (Garfield, 1991, pp. 330–331):

Rotting Floorboards. A man named Frank lives in a kind of hillbilly home with his three children. He sits all day on the porch in his rocker, dressed in his shabby old tweed suit with the leather patches on the elbow and smoking his pipe and reading while the floorboards rot in the porch.

Someone tries to fix them but he just goes on reading while the old house falls apart. Two of the children go to take a nap. I notice my red cooking pot sitting on the shelf.

It is not unusual for older people to have dreams of their house falling down or other deterioration, as we see her in “Rotting Floorboards.” But the dreamer
here has conjured up an image of old age which seems utterly without hope. The man named “Frank” (Honesty? Truthfulness?) dwells in a shabby home, like Philemon and Baucis. He is dressed in shabby clothes and does nothing but sit in a rocking chair. The floorboards are rotting beneath his feet, but he is distracted by his reading. The old house, like an old body, just “falls apart.” The next generation, suggested by the two children, are of no help: they “go to take a nap,” implying unconsciousness and unresponsiveness. The dreamer identifies with Frank because she sees her own kitchen utensil sitting on his shelf. In this dream, evidently, it is not ego-integrity but despair which seems to have won the day.

The following dream was told to Carl Jung (Jung, 1976, p. 17. Par. 187) by an old soldier traveling in a train compartment with Jung, who was a complete stranger to him:

The Old General. I was on parade with a number of young officers, and our commander-in-chief was inspecting us. Eventually he came to me, but instead of asking a technical question he demanded a definition of the beautiful. I tried in vain to find a satisfactory answer, and felt most dreadfully ashamed when he passed on to the next man, a very young major, and asked him the same question. This fellow came out with a damned good answer, just the one I would have given if only I could have found it. This gave me such a shock that I woke up.

The old general’s dream displays a contrast between youth and age. The dream begins with the old general on parade with a group of young officers. Traditional Jungian analysis would describe this dream as “compensatory”: that is, expressing an aspiration toward development of an underdeveloped side of the dreamer’s personality. In interpreting the dream, Jung himself asked the old general what the young major looked like, and the general replied “He looked like me, when I was a young major.” Jung in turn said to him, “Well then, it looks as if you had forgotten or lost something which you were still able to do when you were a young major.” The general “thought for a while, and then he burst out, ‘That’s it, you’ve got it! When I was a young major I was interested in art. But later this interest got swamped by routine’.”

This dream’s manifest imagery, and the general’s own reaction to Jung’s comment, illustrate Jung’s aphorism that “the dream is its own interpretation.” Indeed, the old general’s dream here illustrates an important idea of compensation along with amplification of a dream image by the dreamer’s own interpretation. But there are other points to be made about the old general’s dream, whose meaning is broader, even universal in its implications. The old man here dreams of himself as a younger, seemingly lesser version of himself: a major instead of a general. In fact, one idea of “lifespan development” hopefully suggests that we move through life acquiring higher levels of growth: e.g., greater wisdom. But aging also involves loss and decline: in this dream, the general’s loss of his earlier interest in art and creativity.

All characters in his dream are aspects of the old general himself, including both the commander-in-chief and the young major. Note that the dream begins
with judgment: the commander-in-chief is inspecting the troops on parade. But instead of asking an ordinary or technical question, appropriate to a military setting, the commander-in-chief (or a higher level of the self) asks a profound, archetypal question: a definition of the beautiful. The general “tried in vain to find a satisfactory answer” but could not, just as he could not do so in his own life, despite age and experience. This is a disturbing moment of realization: chronological age does not bring progress. It poses for us another question: What is it in us that can truly respond to these deepest questions of life? Evidently, age itself did not give the capacity to answer. Instead, it was the young major—the younger version of himself—who was able to answer this archetypal question.

In the General’s dream, the younger version of himself gave “a damned good answer,” “just the one I would have given if only I could have found it.” The wording here suggests that the aging General already has within him a hunger for authenticity: “the person I was meant to be.” Yet he cannot find his answer to this deep riddle of life, and so the dream itself is a wake up message, a Call reminding the General that time is running out: “This gave me such a shock that I woke up.” In the second part of this book we shall see how such a Call can be the trigger that launches a deeper spiritual journey.

Erikson’s classic formulation of age as a struggle between ego-integrity and despair underscores the fact that, in psychological terms, there is often “unfinished business” to be done in later life, as in the following dream (Hollis, 2006, p. 56):

The dreamer, in his seventies, is a self-made man, who is described by his therapist as one who “for all his achievements…remained haunted by the sense of deficit:”

**Halfway up the Mountain. I am at the Harvard Club for a meal. Strangely, everyone is unable to be fed because their tie is in a strange knot. I am able to touch my knot and it is released and everyone can eat now. I realize that the club is halfway up a mountain. I climb up the rest of the mountain, go over the top. I then run down the other side in joyous leaps and get to the bottom. I see a peasant with a cart, and the cart is empty.**

The dreamer here is prepared to dine at the Harvard Club, symbol of Ivy League achievement and prestige. But neither the dreamer nor anyone else can be fed because their neckties are bound in a strange knot. In a gesture of magical thinking, the dreamer is able to loosen the bondage of the neckties and thus make it possible for everyone to be nourished in this elegant club setting. The mountain symbolizes the true task of lifespan development. So the dreamer proceeds to climb up the rest of this mountain, even going over the top.

On the other side of the mountain, rather than being in bondage the dreamer is able to run free down the slope “in joyous leaps.” At the bottom of the
mountain another symbol stares him in the face: a peasant with an empty cart. The peasant belongs to the most impoverished strata of society, the very group the dreamer has hoped to escape by worldly accomplishment. So the dreamer, a self-made man, has been admitted to the highest level of society, has freed himself and others from bondage, has even climbed up and over the tallest mountain, only to be confronted at last by what he tried to escape: the reality of deficit and inadequacy.

What the dreamer discovers here is just what Charles Foster Kane, central character in Orson Welles’ “Citizen Kane,” discovers at the end of his life. Despite great achievements, Kane dies with the uncomprehended word “Rosebud” on his lips, a token of childhood dreams and a lifetime of deficit and inadequacy. This discovery on the other side of the mountain is a powerful message for those in the second half of life who have fulfilled their youthful dreams only to find less satisfaction than they expected in the goal.

Dreams of old age as a time of deficit and loss are not unusual, as the following examples confirm. These two dreams are from Elizabeth, a widow in her late seventies, who also had the dream “Rotting Floorboards” discussed earlier (Garfield, 1991, pp. 334, 343):

**Bird Dreams.** *I find an exhausted little white bird. I hold it gently in my two hands and wonder if I can keep it alive.*

*I am driving a car, being shown the right way to go by a low-flying bird that flies just ahead of me. There is a highway on my right and an abyss on my left.*

Elizabeth’s “Bird Dreams” reveal a still deeper confrontation of her struggle of ego-integrity versus despair. The little white bird represents the hope of integrity in the last stage of life. But the dreamer wonders if she can keep this fragile hope alive. In the second dream, she is driving a car, as the ego does as long as we can be in charge of our lives. Yet control (driving) is guided by another bird, this one a low-flying bird that “flies just ahead of me” showing the way forward. On the right side lies a highway, the straight path of successful movement. But on the left side, there is an abyss. The left-hand side is often an image of something ominous, in this case the threat of despair and loss of hope.

The imagery of birds is evident in another dream, this one of Nanette, in her late seventies:

*I am in a room in a house, probably the dining room. There are several white doves fluttering against the window, with light coming through it. I am very careful not to open the door. I am very concerned that they shouldn’t go out of the house. They should stay. I feel very happy. I love it.*

In this dream Nanette’s birds present the dreamer with a very different feeling than we saw with Elizabeth’s birds. Nanette in the dream finds herself in a house, a symbol of the self. This house contains several white doves and the dreamer is taking care to be sure that these birds do not escape, as if they were
last contents of Pandora’s box. Nanette’s birds are “fluttering against the window” as if moving toward the light. The dream ends on a note of very positive feeling: her feeling “I love it” contrast sharply with Elizabeth’s dream where she is unsure if she can keep her bird alive or again where a bird guides her traveling on the highway near an abyss. The dreams of both Elizabeth and Nanette evoke different images of hope. Elizabeth wonders if she can keep her little bird of hope alive, while in Nanette’s dream the birds of hope are maintained in the house (of the self), giving the dreamer happiness.

Patricia Garfield (2001, p. 230) cites the dream of a Romanian-American woman in her late seventies:

*Golden Earth and White Doves.* [She] dreamed that she was lying down in a prairie, where the earth glittered like gold. She thought how lovely it would be to make a dress of the sparkling material.

The next night she had her favorite dream:

*Several white doves fluttered against a sunlight window, with shafts of light flooding the dining room. She was careful not to open the door to let the birds out.*

In the first dream, the dreamer is preparing the cloth herself in what Sufi mystics call the “body of light” fashioned out of gold. In the second dream, the white doves represent the transcendent soul seeking to be free.

The coming of age is a paradox. At the level of the body, in the last stage of life we become, in Yeats’ words, “but a paltry thing, A tattered coat upon a stick.” The countervailing image is not the body but the soul, which can “clap its hands and sing.” Aging, in short, entails a duality, of both vulnerability and strength. As May Sarton (Sarton, 1982, p. 56) put it, “Old age is not an illness, it is a timeless ascent. As power diminishes, we grow toward the light.” This duality is apparent in the dream of Charlotte, an elderly woman, the day before she was scheduled to have an operation:

*The Old Russian Refugee.* There are some tattered Russian refugees in the back of a truck. I’m eager to see them, curious about them. I walk rapidly over to them, and help an old lady down from the back of the truck. She has dark, bright eyes and looks frail and wise. She puts her hand over my arm. We have a feeling of good humor, and we smile at each other.

*I find that it will take all my strength to support her! Then I realize that my smile is too bright. I suddenly have doubt, from fear and from my false eagerness. As soon as I realize that, however, I have a surge of strength: I feel responsible and know that I want to do it! I’m no longer afraid.*

Karen Signell (1990, pp. 278–279) explains the figure in this dream in terms of the archetype of the Wise Old Woman, the feminine version of the Elder Ideal. The elder here is a refugee, but the dreamer feels connected to her: “we smile at
each other.” The vulnerability is there: “it will take all my strength to support her,” but then the dreamer feels “a surge of strength.” In the end, the dreamer is no longer afraid. A similar figure appears in one of the dreams of Sheila Moon (1983, p. 136), in her late fifties:

_Burst in the Dark Night Sky. I am in a lovely large home, with a friend of mine, a woman artist, and we are doing feminine things like dusting, making beds, etc., to get ready for some event. She and I and an unknown woman, old and wise, are on a balcony looking at the night sky and stars. My friend speaks to me some visionary or prophetic sentence. I reply that is how I feel when I write fictions—it takes hold of me and I go flashing into space. This is how it is with the artist, I say, gesturing as I speak. I almost see something burst in the dark night sky._

For many people in our time, aging means moving into “the dark night sky” depicted in Sheila Moon’s dream. In a culture without any shared Elder Ideal aging can truly become a “dark night of the soul.” Without a positive image of later life, age is seen to be decline and darkness, as depicted in the “decline narratives” so prevalent in literature and our popular culture (Gullette, 2004).

This dark side of aging is present in “Burst in the Dark Night Sky” but something more is present, too. In Sheila Moon’s dream the night sky is illuminated by a burst of light, related to the illumination of this dream as Moon herself approached the age of 60. The dream begins, like so many “house” dreams, in “a lovely large home,” which is of course the habitation (self) of the dreamer herself. Two aspects of feminine identity are combined in this setting: domestic tasks and artistic creativity. If the house is the self, then these domestic tasks involve what Thomas Moore would call the care of the soul. The dreamer and her friend the artist stand on a balcony looking up at the night sky. They are accompanied by the Wise Old Woman, a figure perceived by Sheila Moon to be a helper and a source of energy, someone who presides over magical events.

The artist, also the voice the dreamer, is the source of visionary or prophetic truth. Paradoxically, this truth coincides with fiction: the same fictions that Sheila Moon herself would produce, as she did in writing children’s books in her later years. The dream seems to assure her that such creativity need not decline with age but will go on “flashing into space” and illuminating the night sky. More than a year later, in her early sixties, Sheila Moon would write in her journal (Moon, 1983, p. 160): “I feel more and more alone as I get older, especially when I am doing inner work, because through this work I am increasingly aware of my absolute uniqueness—an almost incommunicable uniqueness. Love becomes more rich but more wordless.”

In the dream “Burst in the Dark Night Sky” the Wise Old Woman still remains an “unknown woman.” She does not yet speak in fullness to the dreamer. But she is already a helper and so the dream conveys an optimistic attitude toward the coming of age.
Journey into Old Age

When does the journey into old age begin? There is no fixed chronological age. But it is true that certain ages—60 or 70 ("three score years and ten") — tend to have symbolic significance. These special birthdays may awaken in us the awareness of beginning a journey into old age. Consider the following dream of a man, a married professional who had this dream just before his seventieth birthday (Glucksman, 2007, p. 129):

Uninvited Guest at the Party. I was with a group of friends at a dinner party. We were engaged in lively conversation and having a good time. Suddenly, several strangers appeared among us, and interrupted our party. Then, I noticed two men, both dressed in black, who seemed rather menacing. They came toward me, and I walked away from them. I was afraid they were going to harm me, and I started running. As they ran after me, I noticed my dog running beside me. I was hoping he would somehow protect me, when he suddenly changed into a German shepherd. He snarled at the two men and began to attack them. They ran away, and I felt very relieved.

The dreamer in this case was quite able to interpret his own dream. He pointed out that one of the friends at the party was precisely his age (same day, month, and year) and were talking about their feelings about aging. He remembered that two of his friends had actually been dressed in black at the dinner and they made a joke about it. The color black of course is worn at funerals and in the dream the two men dressed in black are felt to be “menacing.” The dreamer himself felt that these two figures clearly represented his own future death. They were truly “uninvited guests” in his life at age 70. A dog of course is “man’s best friend” and commonly appears in dreams as a protective figure. In this dream, the animal changes into a powerful attack dog, a defense mechanism against threat of oncoming age.

Here is a dream, this one from an eight-five year old (Johnson & Ruhl, 2007, pp. 222–223), someone who had long been youthful but gradually began a transformation characteristic of the “old-old:”

Another World. I dreamed that I awoke in another world that was entirely new to me. It was like a sudden arrival in the next world, a term frequently applied in my Baptist grandmother’s religious monologues, carrying attached to it images of golden chariots, winged angels, streets of gold, divine choirs, and cherubs playing honeyed harps. I carried this vision of heavy too far into adulthood and paid a severe price for its promised happiness. The facts of my adulthood were very different from this golden motif and plunged me into different images. The dream visitation at age eighty-five placed me in a modest and even primitive house made entirely of brown adobe. It was earthen, with not a single straight line in its construction. There were a few people with me, all dressed in brown robes, standing about and not knowing who they were or what to do. I arrived in this world initially in a similar state of confusion but shocked enough to know that I must pull out of this cloud of unknowing. I brought all the tools I knew to bear on this oblivion and quite suddenly awoke.
to who I was and the need to take responsibility for my situation. I went from one person to another, each as caught in oblivion as I had been, and I managed to arouse each person into his present identity.

This brought about a great happiness and capacity to see the beauty and great dignity that we were in. I then left this group and wandered about through many rooms, discovering unexpected beauty and contentment. It was all characterized by the earth-brown color of the material of the building and our clothing. It was not entirely without gold. There was brilliant golden sunshine everywhere, inside and out, but no specific source of light. Everything seemed to give forth its own radiance and power. The dream had no end, and it left me exploring brown/golden radiant world.

In traditional religions the “promised happiness” of an afterlife is found in “the beyond.” But in the contemporary world old age itself may become a sort of afterlife, as in the dream “Another World.” Instead of an imagined paradise, this 85-year old dreamer finds a “primitive house made entirely of brown adobe.” This primitive dwelling, including the earth colors through the dream, is a vivid image of the last stage of life. The dreamer’s own interpretation is revealing: “The insistence on brown color (simplicity and naturalness), the absence of overwrought decoration, and the lack of any straight lines (straight being the symbol of a patriarch, law-dominated culture), were the elements I needed to cure one-sidedness in the vision of paradise” (pp. 222–223).

Significantly, the other characters in the dream—all parts of the dreamer, as we understand—do not know who they are. But the dreamer is impelled to find a way out of this oblivion and confusion, so the dreamer helps enlighten each of these companions about their present identity. He tells them who they are, responding to the deepest question of selfhood: Who am I? The result is “great happiness” and recognition of “beauty and great dignity,” despite dwelling in primitive quarters. The journey into this undiscovered country of old age is met by illumination, with “brilliant golden sunshine everywhere” even without any specific source of light. The dream is a numinous evocation of enlightenment itself, of heavenly brilliance brought into contact with earthly habitation, a vivid image of ego integrity and supreme life satisfaction.

The dream, “Another World,” is cited by Robert Johnson, a noted Jungian psychologist, who tells us that, at the age of 27, he himself was an “unhappy youth,” in Zurich, undergoing analysis with Yolande Jacobi (Segaller & Berger, 1989, pp. 49–50). At that time he had a profound, “epoch-making” dream, “really a summation of who I am, and what I am for, and what I am on the face of the earth to do.” He told the dream to his therapist, Dr. Jacobi. But she responded, “You’re a young man, that’s an old man’s dream, and you should not dream dreams like that,” and she refused to discuss the dream further. But Jacobi’s response was not the last word. Robert Johnson’s dream came to the attention of no one less than Carl Jung himself. Jung said “I don’t care how old you are, you have to live that dream now.” Jung’s comment reinforces a point made earlier describing the “Elder Ideal,” when I argued
against the idea that “In our dreams we are always young.” The archetypal totality of Robert Johnson’s dream, like the dream of an 85-year old, responds to ultimate questions about identity that can arise in youth or in old age.

We have seen at earlier point in life how the positive image of old age, the wise old person, appears in dreams. Here is another dream where the archetype of the Wise Old Woman appears prominently, this time to psychotherapist and writer Helen Luke (2000, pp. 109–110), when she was among the “young-old,” at age 68:

_The Wise Woman. I dreamed that I had been with someone who had been a great help to me, but now I was in a large public building attending to some business or other. As I was about to leave, an acquaintance said to me, speaking of the person who had been so helpful, ‘She will always be there at need.’ I emerged from the building at the top of a long flight of stone steps and saw ‘her’ sitting in the raised driving seat of a horse-drawn wagon, holding whip and rein and waiting for me on the road._

_Just then a policeman went up to her and told her to move on. She called a greeting to me merrily, saying, ‘That’s life—moving on,’ and with a shake of the reins she drove off. I was puzzled about it all, wondering why she had waited for me, since I surely had no need of her then, and wondering why she hadn’t seemed in the least concerned about leaving me behind. Then suddenly I remembered that my child was playing outside the building and I had temporarily forgotten that she, being so young, might have been in trouble without someone to keep an eye on her. Then in the dream a feeling of great happiness and freedom came over me._

Helen Luke at age 68 is moving fully into the last stage of life, as if she has been preparing for this all of her life. The dreamer is met by a figure who has always “been a great help to me,” namely, the figure of the Wise Old Woman, or the Elder Ideal. This figure “will always be there at need,” she is reassured by an acquaintance. At the opening of the dream, the helping figure is already waiting for the dreamer. But then a policeman comes up and tells her “to move on.” The policeman in this dream may represent a punitive voice, but the dream helper is undeterred by this negative element: “That’s life—moving on.” At that point, the dreamer remembers another figure, the Eternal Child, who needs “someone to keep an eye on her.” No matter how old we grow there remains in each of us this childlike element, the impulse of play, the possibility of new growth. Here is the “emancipated innocence” evoked by Allen Chinen as the goal of elder tales. Helen Luke’s dream concludes with “a feeling of great happiness and freedom” arising from the encounter with these two figures in herself, an image of Age and an image of Youth.

Can we generalize about the dreams of people of advanced age? Empirical studies have been done on this point but they have limitations. For example, a classic study of dreams among people over age 65 was carried out in 1961. The subjects were all living in a nursing home and most had symptoms of severe physical decline. Barad and his colleagues (Barad, Altshuler, & Goldfarb,
1961) described the dreams of this sample as almost without exception displaying “a preoccupation with loss of resources.” They went on: “The dreamer is represented as weakened, lost, frequently unable to complete an action, frustrated, vulnerable and threatened by loss of his previous control over himself and his milieu” (p. 420).

The results of this study, however, should be approached with caution. Fewer than 5% of people over the age of 65 are living in nursing homes, so their profoundly negative dream content should not be generalized toward the other 95%. By contrast, when Barad and his colleagues went on to study a group of relatively prosperous and active elders, they found no such themes of loss and decline (Altschuler, Barad, & Goldfarb, 1963). On the contrary, the investigators found that these dreams were more extensively detailed and richly textured. In addition, these dreamers frequently saw themselves actively pursuing goals.

I would imagine that if we systematically studied the dreams, say, of Elderhostel participants, we would find a very different picture than what Barad and his colleagues found among nursing home residents.

Here is a dream of Helen Luke, age 80, recorded in her journal (Luke, 2000, p. 232):

Underground Journey. I dreamed I had been on a long journey underground. A number of individuals were on the same way. There was no sense of underground trains, just empty dark ground on which we had walked. Now after a last stretch we were moving towards the surface at the exit nearest to ‘home,’ which was our goal. A brief last bit of rising ground was ahead.

I was waiting, however, before going on because I thought my mother— who had not traveled with me for the last part of the journey, having chosen another way—would want to be reassured that I had arrived safely at this point where the alternative ways met. It felt as though many traveled on this underground way, but each was alone— though there was a sense of comradeship.

I waited awhile and then I saw my ‘mother’ arriving. She was slender, dark-haired, middle-aged–she recognized me and nodded a greeting and walked on. I was relieved and released to continue my way to the exit. She was wearing a trim suit of natural-colored moire silk or perhaps linen. All the others I had seen were in darkish dress. She did not physically resemble my memories of my mother.

This dream recalls the ancient Near Eastern tale of the goddess Inanna and her descent into the underworld, the realm of the dead (Perera, 1981; Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). To reach the underworld she must pass through seven thresholds and at each stage remove an ornament from her body: crown, earrings, necklace, and so on. These “ornaments” represent aspects of the conventional self that mask the true self, “the face we had before we were born.” As the dream begins, the dreamer has a sense of homecoming. It is at
this point that she meets her “mother.” But the dream image of her mother does not physically resemble her memories of her actual mother. Physical resemblances, like the ornaments of the self, belong to the world of appearances: clothing, masks, coverings of all kinds. In this dream the mother is dressed in a more “natural-colored” garment, while the other figures were “in darkish dress,” perhaps befitting the underworld.

Marianne Kimmitt (2000) would see in Helen Luke’s dream a confirmation of a profound mythic understanding of female life transitions. Kimmitt argues that in our culture aging tends to be seen as a purely chronological or biological process rather than as a psycho-spiritual transition. In her view, the linear and “heroic” approach to the life-course cannot adequately account for female development. Beyond the linear time of our culture there is the image of a different kind of cyclical time which could promise rebirth.

This pattern is documented by Claire De Andrade (2001) in her book Becoming the Wise Woman, which depicts midlife as a developmental stage in a woman’s life involving a transformation of identity, stimulated by events, planned or unplanned. These triggering events become metaphors for a “descent into the underworld” as displayed in myths and stories such as Inanna or Persephone, the classic Greek myth of Mother-Daughter encounter. The transformation invokes the archetype of the Wise Woman and can be traced in the life story of Helen Luke, culminating in her own book Old Age and expressed, most beautifully, in the filmed interviews of Luke herself, at age 90, “In Search of the Sacred.”

Brenneis (1975) reports on changes in women’s inner experience in dreams based on a comparison of dreams of older women (aged 40 to 85) in contrast to dreams from two groups of younger women (aged 18 to 26 and 16 to 17 years). Brenneis found a narrowing of internal personal involvement, a diminishing in concerns over aggression, and a decrease in the dreamer’s sense of herself as central (ego preoccupation). Such trends are consistent with what Tornstam describes as gerotranscendance in later life. Brenneis specifically notes a decline in negative emotions, a finding consistent with Laura Carstensen’s theory of “socio-emotional selectivity” in the psychological process of normal aging (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999).

The gifts reserved for age include something that youth cannot understand: the possibility of detachment with joy, as in this dream of Helen Luke (Luke, 2000, p. 247) at age 84:

*A Burning House. I dreamed of a house in which I was living, with other people living in other rooms of it. There was a fire in adjacent property and the firemen were at work, but it began to look as though our house was threatened. I was talking to a fireman and he asked whose house it was. I suddenly realized that it was not a place I had rented temporarily but my own house. I said so clearly, yet at the same time felt a kind of clarity and release, as though if it burned down no one but myself would be the loser, and it didn’t matter to me*
much. There was no sense of danger to anyone’s life in the dream, only to possessions.

As we have seen before, this dream image of one’s own house can often symbolize the self or the totality of the dreamer’s personality. In this dream the aged Helen Luke has recognized that the last stage of life entails loss: burning down or destruction of what she had taken her self to be. She “suddenly realized” that this life of hers was not “rented temporarily” but was indeed her actual existence, her “one and only life cycle, one that permitted no substitutions,” as Erik Erikson phrased it. Erikson, of course, classically framed the distinctive psychological struggle of old age as “ego-integrity versus despair.”

In “A Burning House,” faced with loss, Helen Luke’s attitude is far from one of despair. Her attitude at first seems perplexing. Rather than integrity or self-affirmation, Luke feels “a kind of clarity and release” when her house is burning down. The feeling of the dream embodies a movement the great medieval mystic Meister Eckhart called “Gelassenheit” or “letting go.” In this condition of detachment Luke can look upon her self and say “No one but myself would be the loser, and it didn’t matter much.”

In terms that parallel Erikson’s last stage of life, Robert Peck (1968) framed the struggle of later life as “ego-preoccupation versus ego-transcendence.” In this dream, Helen Luke’s sees her own life– her memories, her past, her very self– as mere “possessions,” which are indeed endangered by the fire. Her life in its ultimate sense is something more, and she has moved from ego-preoccupation toward a measure of transcendence, of letting go.

Finally, here is one more dream from Helen Luke, this one at age 88, recorded in her journal (Luke, 2000, p. 251):

Waiting. I dreamed that I saw three (or perhaps four) tall containers of plain glass– too tall for even the tallest flowers, not tall enough to be holders of umbrellas. They were of slightly varying heights but all were of clear white, smooth, transparent glass. They were empty, and all shinningly clean, and I felt they were standing there waiting to be filled with that for which they were made. And again as I watched I felt they were a part of my life ready now to receive their meaning, their truth, and I was grieving that I did not know how to fill them or with what, but somehow knew, in T.S. Eliot’s words from ‘The Four Quartets,’ that ‘the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting…’

Eliot’s poem is a meditation on age which ends with the words

We shall not cease exploring
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Helen Luke’s dream, as the dreamer herself now understands, is about “knowing the place for the first time;” that is, becoming clear or empty enough
to be filled by— by what? The dreamer cannot say. A lifetime of effort (until age 88) and the answer is still unknown: hence, the affirmation of faith. Above all, "Waiting" is a dream about patience, a message from Helen Luke to herself and a reminder to us all, who are also waiting as our own lives unfold.

MY OWN EXPERIENCE OF POSITIVE AGING

At age 66 now, I look back at 40 years of working in the field of aging, and I feel a bit like Moses hoping for arrival in the Promised Land. It is a land of hope and opportunity and I am blessed to have come this far. My earliest interest was in lifelong learning and in spirituality and aging, and those are reflected in my current personal life. I have been equally engaged in public and political action, which I continue through my position at AARP. One shift is an interest in environmental advocacy, and, having recently moved to Boulder, Colorado, I find new allies all around for this work. Another interest is work on dream interpretation related to aging, and my own dreams help to guide me as I grow older. Since I have spent much of my career doing fund-raising, I am now using that life experience to help others. I have a small pro bono practice assisting nonprofits with fund-raising and social marketing. All of these activities reflect continued effort to find a balance between civic engagement and cultivation of the "contemplative virtues" of inwardness and spiritual growth. Age presents no obstacle here but instead offers new opportunities to use whatever I have been given to contribute to the common good. The Sufi saying is that "Those whom God wishes to bless, God puts in their hands the means of helping others." There is no better way to express where I want my life to go.

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The Author

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SPIRITUAL CARE AT THE END OF LIFE: HOW FOLKTALES CAN GUIDE US

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ABSTRACT: The approach in this article is based on the first author’s experience using traditional folktales and myths as sources of spiritual wisdom and healing while accompanying a close friend throughout her end-of-life process. Over 200 folktales dealing with illness, death and grief were collected from books of folktales, mythology and spiritual traditions. Inspired by Chinen’s approach to Middle and Elder folktales, these stories were then thematically analyzed for main themes and “field-tested” in workshops at transpersonal, hospice and other conferences internationally. According to Kenneth Doka (1993), people at the end of their lives face three major spiritual tasks. Specific folktales are explored to illustrate spiritual care issues for each of these challenges: (a) To find meaning in one’s life, (b) To die appropriately, (c) To find hope that extends beyond the grave.

When the world was still young, Truth walked around as naked as she was the day she was born. Whenever she came close to a village, people closed their doors and shut their windows, for everyone was afraid to face the Naked Truth. Understandably Truth felt very alone and lonesome. One day she encountered Story who was surrounded by a flock of people of all ages who followed her wherever she went. Truth asked her, “Why is it that people love you, but shy away from me?” Story, who was dressed in beautiful robes, advised Truth: “People love colorful clothes. I will lend you some of my robes and you will see that people will love you too.” Truth followed her advice and dressed herself in the colorful robes of Story. It is said that from this day on, Truth and Story always walk together and that people love both of them (adapted from Weinreich 1997).

As this Jewish tale illustrates, people do not want to face the naked truth but are able to be attentive when truth is presented in layers. Similarly, death and dying in Western society are topics that many find difficult to face head on. Therefore we talk about death using euphemisms such as “they have gone to sleep, were lost on the way to the hospital, entered into eternal rest, or have gone to a better place.” Paul Watzlawick (1978) believes that information transmitted through images and metaphors, rather than by direct communication, is much more effective in creating change in the mind and in behavior. It is absorbed by the ‘right brain’ which has the ability to go beyond the rigid boundaries created by fixed logical and conceptual thinking thereby opening us to a wider perspective. The “colorful clothes” in folktales come layered in the
form of images, symbols, repetitions and hypnotic inductions into the world of “once upon a time.” The dreamlike language of stories bypasses the rational mind and speaks to the listener on the level of the unconscious.

This article first discusses the use of traditional folktales and myths as sources of spiritual support at the end of life. Then specific folktales are explored to illustrate spiritual care issues for each of Kenneth Doka’s (1993) three major spiritual tasks people face at the end of their lives; namely, to: (a) find meaning in one’s life; (b) die appropriately; (c) find hope that extends beyond the grave

**Folktales at the End of Life**

The first author personally experienced traditional stories and myths as sources of spiritual wisdom and healing while she was accompanying a close friend through her end-of-life process. When my friend was suddenly faced with a diagnosis of metastatic ovarian cancer, she likened her experience to the fate of the mythic heroine Persephone of the ancient Greek myth. Suddenly she too felt as if the ground underneath her had opened up and pulled her into the underworld. From one day to the next, her entire world had changed and nothing seemed the same. After having undergone an initial major surgery, her days were spent in doctors’ offices, learning about different treatment options, making appointments, getting test results back and dealing with the bureaucracy of the healthcare system. She felt that her illness was crowding out everything else, and she along with everyone around her tended to forget that she was more than just a disease. She therefore asked me to remind her that she was still alive.

At the time, I was involved in telling traditional folk and fairytales in my young children’s classrooms. The same stories that delighted 5 year olds, such as “The Bear Catching the Moon,” also opened a window into the realms of imagination for my friend and me. They brought not only distraction but also lightness and laughter into the seriousness of the situation and got us involved in the creative endeavor of mutual storytelling. Sometimes we would give each other three words out of which we then had to create a story with a beginning, middle and an end.

Months later as the cancer progressed and I visited my friend in the hospital, she would often ask, “Can you tell me a story?” It was at this point that I began to look for folktales that specifically spoke to her situation and concerns, addressing themes such as illness, death and grief. The story images coupled with the hypnotic like storytelling tone of voice seemed deeply comforting, providing respite from the reality and sterility of the hospital room. Other stories invited dialogue, meaning making and humor into our relationship. A Chinese tale about the difference between heaven and hell and a Tibetan story of a woodcutter who is presented with the choice to be reborn in any of a myriad of different beings inspired us to dialogue about our beliefs regarding what happens after death. The folktale of the seal maiden who had to tear herself away from the topside world and her loved ones in order to
return to her true origins at the bottom of the sea where she finds healing and transformation became a metaphor of hope and healing. The many tales about someone tricking death introduced the healing power of humor as a buffer against fear and worry. As George Bernard Shaw (1906/2009) remarked: “Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh” (p. 85). Finding a way to share not only tears of loss but also tears of laughter created closeness and diminished the separation between her being the patient and me the caregiver.

As the myth of Persephone speaks to the sudden, shocking and unexpected abduction into the underworld at the time of diagnosis, the 5000 year old Sumerian myth of Inanna’s descent into the underworld parallels the incremental loss of footage in the ordinary world. On her journey into the underworld Inanna passes through a series of gates where at each something is taken from her that once identified her as the queen of heaven and earth until eventually she ends up naked and hanging like a slab of meat on a hook. As the author’s friend continued to go through successive hospitalizations, chemotherapy treatments, tests, and medical procedures, she readily identified with the ancient myth, feeling she too was making an Inanna-like descent. Each hospitalization was another gate where something was taken away such as trading her name and role in everyday life for an ID number on a bracelet and her own clothes for a hospital gown. Each chemotherapy treatment brought another loss such as her appetite or her hair falling out. In Close to the Bone: Life-threatening illness and the Search for Meaning Jean Shinoda Bolen (1996) states:

On the medical journey, patients often feel like Inanna: the hospital feels like an underworld in which they are stripped and humbled, and then unconscious under anesthesia, they literally become a slab of meat on an operating table. Or after a series of tests and treatments, each of which takes them deeper into an unknown, fearful world, patients feel metaphorically left hanging on a hook awaiting news that they can come back to life. (p. 33)

For the first author, storytelling became a way to connect and be with her dying friend after all the caretaking had been addressed. It helped her channel her own fears and later her grief into a creative outlet which continues many years after her friend’s death, and keeps them forever connected. The archetypal wisdom of the stories themselves continues to help her find meaning and comfort in her work with the dying and bereaved and in facing the Great Mystery of living and dying in her own life.

It was out of this personal encounter with stories and storytelling that the author began to systematically look for stories on the topic of illness, death and grief from books of folktales, mythology and spiritual traditions from the library, internet searches and her personal collection. Over 200 stories were collected and then analyzed for main themes (see appendix 1 for the main themes and illustrative folktales). Many of these folktales talk about death’s presence in a matter of fact way: “And if they did not die, then they are still alive today” says the traditional ending of most German folktales.
Usually death is portrayed as being as much a part of life as the night is part of the day.

When personified in Western art and literature, death often appears as the Grim Reaper, a scary skeleton man reminiscent of the Dances of Death images from the Middle Ages that were painted on church and cemetery walls to serve as a “memento mori,” reminding people of the inevitability of death, earthly vanities and divine salvation. In contrast to the Grim Reaper image, which seems deeply imprinted into our contemporary Western psyche, many folktales help us look at death in a different way. Some folktales portray death as a beautiful and godlike young man (or woman in romance languages) who radiates irresistible beauty. Other tales introduce death as a caring elder, a godparent, a teacher and ally who accompanies us throughout our lives, helps return us to our true origins or releases us from the curse of immortality. Folktales from many indigenous cultures describe death not as the end of a lifeline as usually perceived in the West, but as a part of the natural cycle of all life (*Annie and the Old One*-Native American). These stories remind us that death is part of all nature (*Why Death is like the Banana Tree*-Madagascar) and that it is our human responsibility to make room for future generations (*The Mortal King*-China). Some stories reconcile and comfort us, letting us know that we do not stand alone with the pain of grief and loss (*Mustard Seed Story*-Buddhist). Other stories (*The Cow-Tail Switch*-Liberia) generate more questions than they answer, inviting dialogue and reflection.

The attempt to trick death or to obtain immortality is a common theme among traditional folktales from all cultures and times. In fact, this is the most prevalent theme among the stories collected and reflects the universal fear of and difficulty accepting death. Whether death gets trapped in a hollowed out tree trunk (*The Woodcutter and Death*-Nepal), becomes stuck in a pear tree (*Aunt Misery*-Puerto Rico), or is frightened away by a strange looking creature (*Outwitting Death*-Hungary), in the end death gains the upper hand or the protagonist realizes that eventually immortality becomes a curse and will plead with death to release them from eternal life (*The Man Who did not Wish to Die*—Japan).

As a hospice social worker, I (CL) visit with people who are approaching the end of their lives, provide community education on end-of-life issues and lead workshops for health care professionals in which I use folktales as teaching tools to ease into discussions about death and dying. Most people seem to readily connect with stories and can easily identify with a protagonist facing seemingly insurmountable challenges, such as having to spin a room full of straw into gold, while at the same time encountering unforeseen helpers. In folktales and myths, they can vicariously experience ways of finding strength and hope, courage and spiritual perspective. The authors have included folktales in continuing education courses on spiritual issues in illness, death and grief and in workshops presented at transpersonal, hospice and other international conferences. Thus many of the stories have been “field-tested” to explore their implications for education and spiritual care as described later.
Myths are stories reworked over generations to a finely-honed state where they serve as “a powerful picture language for the communication of traditional wisdom” (Campbell, 1949, p. 43). Herrnstein-Smith (1981) presents the thesis that the mind has the capacity and propensity to create certain basic stories. These narrative structures may be comparable to Chomsky’s (1985) concept of deep grammatical structures in that these stories organize experience much as deep grammar organizes language. Myths are vivid manifestations of these fundamental organizing principles that exist within the psyche and the cosmos (Frank & Frank, 1991; Jung, 1964; Krippner & Welch, 1992). Houston (1989) makes the same point this way: “Myth is something that never was but is always happening” (p. 101).

Myths awaken and maintain in the individual a sense of awe and gratitude in relation to the spiritual dimension of the universe. They provide a bridge between one’s local consciousness and transcendent realms and eternal forms. Eliade (1960) argues that the personal unconscious and “private mythologies” alone cannot awaken an individual’s mystical consciousness. It requires “the general and the universal symbols [to] awaken individual experience and transmute it into a spiritual act, into metaphysical comprehension of the world” (p. 213). The myth’s power to open the individual to the spiritual dimension of life is not tied to a particular social system or epoch. Its potency lies in its symbolic nature. “Mythological symbols touch and exhilarate centers of life beyond the reach of vocabularies of reason and coercion” (Campbell, 1968, p. 4).

Folktales are essentially narrative complexes that collapse many mythic stories into one simpler story (Miller, 1976). Most folktales can be traced back to earlier myths, with the story compressed and simplified (Campbell, 1972b). Folktales have long been considered sources of wisdom in transpersonal psychology. In several articles in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Chinen (1985, 1989, 1993) studied folktales to gain a fresh perspective on the psychological and spiritual issues faced by middle-aged and elderly persons. He observed that most folktales feature youthful protagonists, and reflect the psychology of youth—the struggle to become an individual in the real world. The hero or heroine leaves home to seek treasure or true love, battles enemies, and ultimately triumphs. Such folktales are versions of the Hero’s Journey myth that Campbell (1972a) identified as prevalent in many cultural traditions.

“What happens,” Chinen (1985) asked, “in that ‘ever after’—when the Prince turns fifty, or the Princess is widowed?” (p. 99). Chinen reviewed 4500 folktales from around the globe, and found that 9% of them had middle-aged protagonists and 2% concerned the elderly. Chinen thematically analyzed these “elder tales” to reveal their major motifs, and then related these stories to contemporary research in the psychology of aging. His main finding was that rather than emphasizing personal development, elder tales focus on the following transpersonal tasks: (a) the need for renewal in the face of the many material losses of later life; (b) encountering a numinous or supernatural element; and (c) spiritual transformation.
While it may seem paradoxical or even foolish to assert that folktales are repositories of insight and wisdom, Chinen (1985) argues that,

The folktale genre may be uniquely appropriate for the insights. Folktales have been handed down over centuries, so that they contain the distilled experience of many generations. Folktales are also not meant to be believed, so they can say the unspeakable, the repressed or intolerable in society. They’re like dreams. They bring up what we don’t want to look at. They force us to face truths that we might ordinarily overlook. (p. 117)

Folktales and myths reveal the presence of universal themes and patterns regarding human suffering, dying and grieving. The struggles and arduous journeys of the heroes and heroines in folktales and myths depict the ways people feel, hope, suffer, wish and behave in the midst of life’s challenges. As described above in the author’s personal experience with a dying friend, their collective wisdom can evoke, deepen and transform our understanding of the experience of illness, death and grief. Bruno Bettelheim (1977) who used folktales in his clinical and theoretical work, stated that,

The folktale takes the existential anxieties and dilemmas very seriously and addresses itself directly to them: the need to be loved and the fear that one is thought to be worthless; the love of life, and the fear of death. Further, the folktale offers solutions in ways everyone can grasp on their own level of understanding. (p. 10)

FOLKTALES AND MYTHS IN SPIRITUAL CARE

This part of the article focuses on the usefulness of folktales and myths for spiritual care at the end-of-life, especially for people facing their dying time. The folktales and myths included illustrate the three spiritual tasks identified by Doka (1993): To find meaning in one’s life, die appropriately, and find hope that extends beyond the grave.

To Find Meaning in One’s Life

The Russian folktale Joseph the Tailor illustrates the importance of life review and reminiscence in finding meaning at the end of one’s life. As Joseph ages he experiences how his coat that has served him throughout his long life begins, as happens with all things in life, to wear away. Being a tailor, he makes the coat into a jacket, the jacket into a cap and finally the cap into a bow tie only to discover that none of these last forever either. Eventually, all that is left are his memories and stories. But they remind him of the richness of a life well lived, help him accept and integrate his losses and gain a perspective of deep meaning and gratitude.

During the last months to weeks of a person’s life, this kind of reminiscence is one of the most important spiritual tasks. Likewise it is important for a
caregiver or family member to elicit from and be fully present for the dying person to share his or her life stories. Joseph the tailor when asked by his grandchildren “Grandpa, tell us about your coat” found the sharing of life stories with active listeners to be a healing and meaning making experience. Alice Walker (1990) described “The process of the storytelling is itself a healing process because someone is taking the time to tell you a story that has great meaning to them...They want to give it to you in a form that becomes inseparable from your whole self” (p. 7). In this way a story becomes a gift of connection between the teller and listener, allowing everyone to emerge replenished.

Butler (1963) theorized that life review is a naturally occurring, universal mental process and that most elderly people spontaneously engage in reminiscing about their lives. As individuals realize that there is limited time remaining to them, they will examine what kind of life they have lived, and whether they feel their life was a success or failure. Butler saw the life review process as essential to the final reorganization and integration of the personality and as a final opportunity for the individual to come to understand the conflicts of earlier life, coming to some resolution or forgiveness. This theory parallels that of Erikson (1982) who proposed that the critical factor in accepting death is one’s integration (vs. despair) over one’s lived life. According to Erikson, this reminiscence and introspection is most productive when experienced with significant others. Facilitating a life review is widely recognized as an important therapeutic tool in end-of-life-care.

The folktale of Joseph the Tailor models a life review not focused on a chronological recounting of one’s life nor on one’s worldly achievements of rank and wealth but on one’s relationships, values and interconnectedness. These parallel what Frank Ostaseski, founding director of the San Francisco Zen Hospice Project, calls the most important questions at the end of one’s life: “Am I loved ?” and “Did I love well ?”

When it is no longer possible for a dying person to engage in the telling of their own life stories, traditional folktales and myths can become an important “medicine” to address and ease spiritual pain at the end of life. Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992) coined the phrase “stories as medicine” to describe their capacity to help find meaning in suffering, illness and death. Another way of utilizing the healing power of traditional stories that the author often suggests to hospice families, especially when at the bedside of a very ill, demented or comatose patient, is to read stories out loud. When all practical caregiving tasks have been addressed and conversation is no longer possible, family members often feel uncomfortable sitting at the bedside watching their loved one go through the dying process without having a specific task to focus on. Reading stories, particularly those from the patient’s childhood, cultural and/or spiritual background, provide a focus while maintaining an emotional connection. Since it is believed that hearing is usually the last sense to go, this is a chance for the patient to hear the comforting voice of a loved one while allowing the images and metaphors of stories to work on the unconscious mind.
To Die Appropriately

The second spiritual challenge identified by Doka (1993) is for the dying person to clarify and communicate their wishes about their dying time. Frequently the patient and their family have to decide when to choose between life-extending measures versus opting for comfort care. If a person’s view of death is informed by the medieval image of the Grim Reaper, they will likely try to stave off death at all cost. The Godfather Death tale, originally collected by the Brothers Grimm (variations of which exist in many cultures) allows for a different perspective. Here death is portrayed as being part of the family (a godparent), as a teacher and healer who offers us an alternative benevolent image of death. In this traditional folktale a father chooses Death to become his son’s godparent because Death treats everyone the same, and he promises to make his son rich and famous, for as Death states, “he who has me as a friend can lack nothing” (Yolen, 1986, p. 467). As the child grows up, Godfather Death prepares his godson to become a great physician who knows the art of healing and can tell when it is time to live and when it is time to die. Death reminds the young physician that wherever he visits a patient whether in a great castle or in a little shack by the roadside, he will always be there as well. Death continues: “If I stand by the head of the sick man, you may say with confidence that you will make him well again…but if I stand by the patient’s feet, he is mine, and you must say that all remedies are in vain, and that no physician in the world could save him” (p. 467). Death warns the young physician “beware of using the herb against my will, or it might fare ill with you” (p. 467). In the story the young physician does not heed his Godfather’s warning but tricks death by turning the patient’s bed around. At the same time the tale’s ending reminds us that ultimately no one can cheat death and get away with it.

In contemporary Western medicine many physicians and patients see death as the enemy. In an attempt to fight off death they try, just as the physician in Godfather Death does, to “turn the bed around.” This was made very clear to me (CL) by a hospice patient, himself a physician, who was unable to accept his own dying even though he knew there were no further life-extending treatments. This patient was so afraid of losing control over his capacity to be in charge of his own treatment that he refused to let the hospice staff administer effective pain medication. He died in excruciating physical and emotional pain, lashing out at and alienating his family, thereby depriving himself and everyone involved of a dignified and peaceful death.

If a patient and their family can accept death as “part of the family,” like a godparent, it would help them to know when it is time to tell the physician to stop “turning the bed around.” The awareness of this choice, as illustrated by an alternative view of death in the Godfather Death and other traditional folktales, could mitigate some of the suffering and struggle around dying, and inform decision-making about medical options. The author (CL) has found the Godfather Death story to be a valuable resource in facilitating discussions about end-of-life choices with the general public as well as with medical students at the UCSF palliative care training program.
Along with making one’s Advanced Directives for Medical Decisions it is an important task to also communicate our wishes regarding funeral plans that are congruent with our spiritual beliefs. One hospice patient, a young woman dying of a brain tumor, befriended death by taking an active role in planning her own funeral. For weeks before her death, her pine coffin became the centerpiece of her living room. She took naps in it, and her last creative act involved stenciling it with her beloved sunflowers. In addition to a traditional burial and a service in her parents’ church she also planned a celebration of her life for her family and friends, selected her own music and asked for the following story adapted from the Jewish Talmud to be told:

Two ships were sailing in a harbor. One was leaving for the open seas and the other was returning home after a long journey. People cheered the ship that was leaving for its journey, hardly paying attention to the one that was returning to port. An old man remarked: “Why not rejoice for a ship sailing out to sea, for you do not know what terrible dangers it may encounter. Rejoice rather for the ship that has reached shore, bringing its passengers safely home.”

And so it is in the world. When a child is born, all rejoice. When someone dies, all weep. But maybe it should be the other way around—that people rejoice at the end of a person’s life rather than in the beginning. For no one can tell what unforeseen dangers await a newborn child, but when a person dies, they have successfully completed their life journey. (Lamm, 2004)

To Find Hope that Extends Beyond Death

A final spiritual challenge is to leave something enduring, something that continues after death. The desire to leave a legacy has been identified as an important developmental task of later adulthood (Traxler, 1980) and of the dying (Doka & Morgan, 1999). Some people believe they live on through their children, others through their accomplishments and good works. Almost everyone has some personal possessions that have been important to them throughout their life, and making plans to pass these on to the people they love can provide a sense of continuity. The Japanese folktale, The Mirror of Matsuyama, depicts how such inheritances help us keep an ongoing relationship with a person who has died. On her deathbed, the mother in this story presents to her young daughter a beautiful handheld mirror: “At times when you feel very alone, look into it. I promise you, that you will always see me” (Gersie, 1991 p. 303). Soon afterwards the mother dies. The mirror becomes their continuing link as the daughter uses it to evoke the presence of her dead mother. For the survivor, such objects can evoke and sustain an internalized relationship with the deceased. For the dying, these objects become a part of their legacy and ensure continued remembrance. This traditional folktale confirms the spiritual solace that comes with knowing that some part of a person will endure beyond death when their presence is evoked through the things they bequeath.

Another way to find hope that extends beyond death is to write a spiritual (also known as ethical) will. Based on ancient Jewish traditions first described in the
Old Testament 3000 years ago (Genesis Ch. 49) a spiritual will is a personal legacy letter that describes what truly mattered in one’s life. It is usually directed towards a specific person (or one’s family) and describes important values, life lessons, prayers, hopes for the future and how one wants to be remembered. In Healthy Aging: A Lifelong Guide to Your Physical and Spiritual Well-Being, Andrew Weil (2005) promotes writing an “ethical will as a gift of spiritual health” (p. 290) and asserts that its “main importance is what it gives the writer in the midst of life” (p. 288). It helps people clarify their values, focus on their life purpose while living fully with the awareness of their mortality. The above mentioned folktale of Joseph the Tailor provides a template for passing on such values and life learnings. In the story Joseph shares with his family some of the happiest moments of his life, important achievements as well as challenges he faced and how he was able to overcome them. He talks about the many losses he experienced and how his ability to accept, adapt and transform his losses sustained him throughout his life’s journey. The first author has used Joseph the Tailor’s story as a guide to help workshop and conference participants write their own spiritual will. A sample of questions used with hospice patients is presented in appendix 2.

Stephen Levine (1998), along with philosophers throughout the ages, highlights the value of living consciously in the shadow of death. He developed a program where participants practice living as though this was their last year to live. Another traditional folktale Death’s Messenger (Germany), collected by the Brothers Grimm, illustrates how most of us tend to deny the many signs of aging and thus are caught unaware when death comes. This folktale serves as a reminder to ask ourselves: If we were to really listen to death’s messengers, how would we want to live our life? Folktales and myths can help people deepen and transform their reflections about death and dying while connecting their own personal struggle to the challenges and realities of human existence across different times and cultures.

ENDNOTES

1 All of the folktales mentioned in this article are readily available online by searching using the title of the story.

2 In quotes from Chinen and Bettelheim in this article, the term folktale was substituted for fairytale in some of the original text. There is much overlap in the use of these two terms, and the authors of this article felt switching back and forth between these terms would be confusing.

REFERENCES


**Appendix 1**

Myths & Folktales about Illness & Death: Story Themes

* Illness as a Journey

Persephone Myth (Greek)
Inanna Myth (Sumerian)
The Water of Life (Germany)

* Death as an Integral Part of Life

Mustard Seed Story (India)
Annie and the Old One (Native American)
Why Death is Like the Banana Tree (Madagascar)

* Tricking Death

Godfather Death (Germany)
The Woodcutter and Death (Nepal)
Aunt Misery (Puerto Rico)
The Enchanted Apple Tree (France)
The Man who did not Wish to Die (Japan)
Outwitting Death (Hungary)
The Boy with the Ale Keg (Norway)

* Spiritual Tasks of the Dying

- Finding Meaning in One’s Life

Just Enough/Joseph the Tailor (Russia)

- To Die Appropriately
Godfather Death (Germany)

- Finding Hope Beyond Death

The Mirror of Matsuyama (Japan)
Just Enough/Joseph the Tailor (Russian)

* Images of the Afterlife

The Difference between Heaven and Hell (Chinese)
The Little Girl with the Matchsticks (Denmark)
The Mountains of Tibet (Tibet)

* Hope and Healing

Sealskin (Greenland)
Water of Life (Germany)

APPENDIX 2

An Ethical/Spiritual Will is a personal legacy letter that describes what truly has mattered in one’s life. It is usually directed towards a specific person (or one’s family) and describes important values, life lessons, prayers, hopes for the future and how one wants to be remembered.

Below is a list of prompts that may be used to share or write your own reflections or use as questions with someone else:

One of the happiest moments in my life……………………………………………
One of the most challenging moments in my life, and what helped me get through them……………………………………………………………………
What has been most important in my life…………………………………………
An important lesson I learned in my life…………………………………………
What I am most proud of……………………………………………………………
A saying/proverb that has been a guiding line for my life………………………
What I want you to know about me………………………………………………
An important tradition for me………………………………………………………
Someone who has been a great teacher/influence in my life……………………
Some of my favorite places and what I learned there……………………………..
I regret deeply………………………………………………………………………
I am grateful for……………………………………………………………………
I wish I had…………………………………………………………………………
Mistakes I made and what I learned from them……………………………………
I hope you remember me as………………………………………………………
I hope that during your lifetime you will…………………………………………
The Authors

Christel Lukoff, Ph.D., MFT, is a hospice social worker, a psychotherapist in private practice, and a storyteller. She utilizes the healing potential of traditional stories and myths in her clinical work with the elderly, the dying and bereaved as well as in conference presentations and workshops throughout the U.S., Europe and her native Germany. She has published 2 CD’s: When Life and Death Walk Together and Stories of Love and Loss.

Author’s note:
Working as a hospice social worker accompanying individuals and their families through their end of life journey, I am often asked: Isn’t that a depressing job? But for me, learning about death is really learning about living. It is a privilege to be with people at such a sacred and intimate time in their lives. It reminds me daily of the preciousness and fragility of life. At the weekly interdisciplinary team meetings with my fellow hospice workers, I make sure to sit where I can read a tile that adorns the wall of the meeting room saying: “And what is it you plan to do with this one wild and precious life of yours?” (from Mary Oliver “A Summer Day”). For me this line represents the challenge to live each day as if it were my last while honoring each moment with gratitude and awe. It is a life motto I strive to tend to on a daily basis.

In my work as a psychotherapist in private practice, I help people restore their lives through re-story-ing. Sometimes this involves having clients simply share their life story out loud with me as a witness in order to deepen their understanding of their story and its characters. Sometimes it involves a process of editing by helping a client retrieve lost parts of their story, focus on different parts of the story or help them imagine a different ending. Using traditional stories and storytelling in workshops, in community presentations about end of life care, and at times at the bedside, keeps awake a sense of magic, nurtures my creativity and keeps my love for stories alive.

David Lukoff, Ph.D., is a Professor of Psychology at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and a licensed psychologist in California. He is author of 80 articles and chapters on spiritual issues and mental health and co-author of the DSM-IV category Religious or Spiritual Problem. He has been an active workshop presenter internationally providing training in spiritual competencies in areas such as grief, death, illness, recovery, spiritual problems and spiritual emergencies.

Author’s note:
I acquired a deep appreciation for myths and symbols as experiential realities while writing a series of case studies based on truly listening to the voices of psychosis from initiates whose stories had many similarities to myths. Some
part of my own unconscious was stirred as I explored the “Myths in Mental Illness” (title of my first case study published in JTP). Writing this case study helped me find meaning for a time in my life that I earlier had dismissed as an embarrassing 2 month hallucinogen-induced grandiose psychotic experience. Yet this same experience was also my spiritual awakening, although it took Jungian analysis and transpersonal study to realize this.

Once awakened to the world of symbols, I became a fan of Allan Chinen’s work on Elder and Middle Tales—attending his presentations at ATP conferences starting in the 1980’s, along with reading his books and articles in JTP. As I am now transitioning between these two stages in life, I often find myself turning back to his work. His ATP talks on fairytales are an oft listened to resource on my ipod as I seek transcendence and renewal along with some humor to face losses in later life. Listening to these succinct non assuming tales helps me makes sense out of life’s journey while embodying deep acceptance and gratitude.
CONSCIOUS AGING AND WORLDVIEW TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT: For nearly two decades, a multi-disciplinary team of researchers has conducted qualitative and quantitative studies on positive worldview transformation. This included a comparative study of 60 teachers from different transformative traditions as well as longitudinal studies of the psychological and social impact of transformative practices. From this work, a model of worldview transformation was formulated that identifies consciousness-based practices that can promote personal and social well-being. In this paper we apply the model of worldview transformation to conscious aging. We explore the ways that conscious inquiry can inform people’s experiences of aging, their models of what happens when they die, and an understanding of the way these beliefs impact how they live. A curriculum is outlined that was designed out of the worldview transformation model to help expand awareness of conscious aging, promote individual and social well-being, and facilitate a supportive atmosphere for exploration and mutual discovery.

Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.

Mahatma Gandhi

We all have personal stories about our lives and our place in the world. As we grow and develop, these worldviews inform how we live, what gives us purpose, what we value, how we understand reality and our place in it.

Many factors shape people’s worldview. These include biology, temperament, family upbringing, culture, and geography, among others (Schlitz, Vieten, & Miller, 2010).

The social and neuropsychological theories of development indicate that as people grow and interact with the world, they learn to categorize, discriminate, and generalize about what they see and feel (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 2002; Siegler & Alibali, 2005). A worldview combines beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, values, stereotypes, and ideas to construct complex conceptual frameworks

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that organize lived experience. Together these form a kind of scaffolding on which individuals can build a meaning system about their past, present, and future.

Worldviews profoundly impact individual and collective goals and desires. They shape what people know and how they know it, both consciously and unconsciously. Worldviews inform human behavior in relationships, serving to choreograph individual and social actions and reactions at all times. They shape fundamental habits of self-reflection, analysis of self and other, and the means by which people communicate. Worldviews impact the questions people ask, how they learn and grow, and ultimately how they make sense of their experiences.

For example, a person who holds the view that the world is an essentially unsafe place, filled with people who are out to lie to them or steal from them, will assume a fearful and suspicious stance toward everyday experiences—a hypervigilance that can cause stress and unhappiness. On the other hand, a view of the world that holds that there are indeed some unsafe places and people but in general most people are honest and helpful—that in fact only a small amount of attention need be directed toward self-protection—will result in more calm and peaceful everyday experiences and leave a surplus of energy to engage in more health-enhancing activities. This example is quite simple and does not take into account a range of possible environmental moderators, but in essence it illuminates that one’s worldview defines his or her general experience of self and world, and influences all perceptions and resulting behaviors.

**TRANSFORMING WORLDVIEWS**

Some facets of worldview are dynamic and changing. Others are more stable over time. Grounded in our values and beliefs, worldviews can become rigid and resistant to change. This is true even when people are presented with information that refutes their previous assumption (Cook-Greuter, 2000; Dunbar, 2008; Dunbar, Fugelsang, & Stein, 2007). On the other hand, people are also able to substantially shift their worldview through life experiences or intentional practices (Gardner, 2004; Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2008). When this transformation in worldview happens, new options can emerge, even within the same set of life conditions.

Such transformations in worldview can lead to a reorganization of one’s conceptual maps. As noted by Schlitz, Vieten, and Miller (2010):

While psychological development and maturation most frequently are thought to involve the addition of knowledge and changes in what people know, transformation involves epistemological changes in how they know what they know. It is not only behavior that changes but also the motivational substrate from which that behavior arises. It is not only a change in what people do but also in who they understand themselves to be at an ontological level. (p. 20)
Both life development and aging impact people’s worldviews. People view aging in different ways. In a post-modern perspective, dominated by a materialist paradigm that links the person and the person’s body in a fundamental unity, aging can be seen as a failure on the road to death (Valle & Mohs, 2004). However, in many other cultures, there is not such a firm line between personhood and embodiment. In various indigenous societies, for example, there is the belief that ancestors live on in a spirit realm that allows communication and engagement in an ongoing way. While aging comes with changes in life circumstances and physical capacities, it is celebrated in many cultures. And while death can be seen as a loss, it is not the end of the relationship between the living and the departed.

Another dominant perspective in the West is religious, which can provide a healthy framework for those who are aging to feel supported by a benevolent source, to look ahead to some experience of consciousness surviving bodily death, and to experience health benefits associated with spiritual/religious engagement (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Seeman, Dubin, & Seeman, 2003). The religious perspective can also have consequences such as negative spiritual coping or feeling punished or abandoned by God (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). It is also possible that those with a less materialist perspective may not pay as much attention to maintaining their physical health, ignoring the physical body in favor of caring for the soul.

The topic of aging is becoming more relevant as demographics shift and the aging population grows in size. The latest US Census Bureau brief on data from the 2010 Census shows that the number of seniors is increasing faster than younger populations, raising the nation’s median age from 35.3 in 2000 to 37.2 in 2010 (Howden & Meyer, 2011). The number of people reaching the age of 65 has jumped from about 7.5 million in the 1930s to 34 million today. By 2012, the American population of people 50 years and older will reach 100 million. January 2011 witnessed the first of approximately 77 million baby boomers, born from 1946 through 1964, moving quickly to retirement age and, according to the UN Population Division, this trend is global, with one in five people expected to be 65 or older by 2035 (United Nations www.un.org/esa/population).

In the light of these changing demographics, there is a growing movement to bring greater awareness to the process of aging and the potentials for growth and transformation that lie therein. A movement of conscious aging offers a new way of considering aging that moves past the industrial world’s preoccupation with youth, toward an appreciation of the transformative potentials that come with aging. In this way, a new model of aging is called for that embraces the fullness of life and all its complexities. Grounded in transpersonal and humanistic psychology (Moody, 2003; Ram Dass, 2000), this movement recognizes human psychological and spiritual development as unfolding over the life span. Similar to the way that researchers have recently learned that neural plasticity and even neurogenesis continue well into old age.
(Ehninger & Kempermann, 2008), a conscious-aging perspective holds that personal growth and development can occur from pre-birth to post-death.

Positive development as it related to conscious aging is linked to life satisfaction and informs attitudes and practices leading up to death and potentially beyond (Labouvie-Vief & Diehl, 2000). Moody (2003) emphasizes adaptation to age-related losses as characteristic of “successful” aging. This is in contrast to “conscious” aging which implies a more complex, intentional experience.

Tornstam (2005) defines transformations in elderhood as “gerotranscendence.” From this perspective, he argues that people become less self-focused and more selective in their choice of social and other activities. Solitude becomes more important, with a decreased interest in superficial social interaction, material things, and with a greater need for meditation or introspection. People in this construct of gerotranscendence report a reduction in the fear of death—with a deep appreciation of life and death. This can lead to broadmindedness and a sense of tolerance, as well as increased feelings of unity with the universe and a new view of time. Such shifts may support positive transformations in worldview.

It is the thesis of this essay that the worldviews people hold about aging, death, and what lies beyond profoundly influence how they experience their lives in both positive and negative ways. Participating in a curriculum that brings greater awareness to these worldviews holds the potential to transform them in ways that support growth and well-being.

Through a multiyear research program, researchers at the Institute of Noetic Sciences have identified a model of worldview transformation that can be applied to the issues of conscious aging. Through the application of this model, we explore the ways in which awareness can be brought to aging, dying, and beyond. We further identify practices that can help people reflect on their worldviews, beliefs, stereotypes, and assumptions about aging in ways that may enhance the transformative, rather than the traumatic, aspects of growing older.

**BACKGROUND**

In 1997, a multidisciplinary team of researchers initiated a series of studies focused on the process of worldview transformation. The goal has been to understand the process by which people experience fundamental shifts in perception that alter how they view and interact with themselves and the world around them. In particular, our team investigated factors that facilitate the kind of worldview transformations that result in an increased sense of purpose, meaning, and prosocial behavior for the participants. Such work applies well to the challenges and opportunities facing seniors. This program of research included analysis of individual narratives of personal transformation, three focus groups with teachers of transformative processes, in-depth interviews...
with sixty representatives of ancient and modern transformative traditions (Schlitz, et al., 2008), surveys of over 1500 people who had experienced their own transformations (Vieten, Cohen, Schlitz, & Estrada-Hollenbeck, 2011a), two longitudinal studies of participants involved in community-based transformative practice programs (Vieten, Cohen, Schlitz, Radin, & Estrada-Hollenbeck, 2011b), and a study on how engagement in transformative practices affects health and well-being. Through this research, we have identified a naturalistic model of worldview transformation (Vieten, Schlitz, & Amorok, 2009) that can be applied to conscious aging.

Focusing specifically on the role of aging in worldview transformation, our team has also collected more than fifty additional audio and video interviews with representatives of the world’s religious traditions, cultural leaders from sites as diverse as the outback of Australia to the rainforest of Ecuador, and with scientists and health practitioners from multiple disciplines, as well as religious scholars and spiritual teachers. In short interviews and small focused discussion groups, we invited people to talk with us about their views of death, dying, and what lies beyond. Based on a thematic analysis, we have used these data to shape an educational program on conscious aging and worldview transformation through blended learning (e.g., residential workshops, tele-seminars, print materials, and social media).

**How Do Worldviews Transform?**

A transformation in worldview begins long before most people are aware that anything is changing. Peak experiences, numinous or mystical moments, life transitions—all these primers, even if not directly experienced as transformative, lay the groundwork for what is to come. Even when people can point to a pivotal moment in their life, they can often identify, in retrospect, what might be termed *destabilizers*—a combination of factors that set the stage.

The result may be a specific episode, period of life, or series of experiences that culminate in an aha! moment (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001; White, 1994). Whether an encounter of stunning beauty or one of deep pain or loss, such as the death of a loved one or the diagnosis of a life-threatening disease, this aha! moment challenges people’s previous assumptions, leading them to change the way they see the world. Attempts to fit the new experiences or realizations into their old perspective fail, often forcing their awareness to expand to make room for the new insight. Aging and the reflection on the inevitable nature of bodily decline and death offer just such opportunities to broaden and deepen our understanding of what gives us meaning and purpose in life.

For Lee Lipsenthal (2011), a physician and cancer patient who died shortly after we conducted our interview, there were various stages in the process of worldview transformation as it relates to living and dying. In his words:

Transformational processes happen to us through life. Anybody looking in the mirror today will see that they aren’t the same person they were ten years
ago: they’ve transformed. So, transformation is a lifelong process. Whether
death is an ultimate lifelong process or an ultimate transformative process, I
don’t know … There’s a constant death and rebirth of this life as an
individual; there’s a constant change. For me personally, how you age and
die is much more important than if you die.

Jean Watson (2011), a nurse educator who has worked with the aging and
dying, described the value of an expanded worldview that sees life and death as
part of the pattern of our evolution:

We need an expanded cosmology that allows us to embrace the physical, the
nonphysical, the infinity or the sacred circle of life and all of nature. I think
part of our evolution is to find that expanded image and vision of
possibilities that embrace the unknown, that embrace the mystery, that
invite it into our evolution. Maybe we’ve evolved as much as we’re going to
evolve biologically and the next real evolution of human kind is the
evolution of human consciousness.

Of course, the transformative moment that leads to such insight can result in
redoubled efforts to protect against further destabilization. It can also inspire
an entirely new worldview that is capable of giving meaning to what happened.
In this case, it can move people to the discovery of a set of practices that helps
them to integrate new insights as the transformative path unfolds.

In our interview with religious scholar Ed Bastian (2011), he described the
importance of practices that engage our awareness of and self-reflection on
aging and dying:

Contemplating death has a way of helping us prioritize what’s most
important in our life and what this precious life is really good for, what it’s
meant for. And contemplating death helps you to prioritize and to simply let
the false self, the false ego, the expectations that others had for you, the
expectations you had for yourself, fall away.

It’s the kind of thing you need to prepare for. It’s a lifetime of preparation,
of living fully, of engaging in the deepest questions of meaning and purpose
in life. And it’s a lifetime of preparing your consciousness and your state of
being so that it’s ready to live consciously through your death and see it as
the most exciting opportunity we have. The great transition. The great
adventure. The great end game.

Practices for Conscious Aging and Worldview Transformation

How can people change worldviews to ones that are life enhancing during
aging? The first step is to bring attention to what one’s worldview is.
Worldviews most often function at an implicit level, under the surface of
conscious awareness. Through inquiry and self-examination, people can
become aware of worldviews that either limit or enhance their daily experience of life.

Often, for those who are aging, simple awareness of worldview is not enough to make positive shifts in perspective that enhance everyday life. One must also engage in intentional practices to support a positive transformation in worldview. Transformative practices can take many forms. In our series of studies, we found that meditation was far and away the most highly recommended practice for development and well-being. Having said this, rather than recommending specific practices, we have identified a number of essential ingredients of practices that support positive worldview transformation as one ages. When brought to almost any activity, whether explicitly personal growth–oriented or not, these ingredients make day to day activities, such as gardening, journaling, golf, or book clubs, pathways toward positive transformation.

Attention

The first and perhaps most essential ingredient is bringing attention toward greater self-awareness. Here there is the emphasis on self-reflection and the appreciation of the noetic (inner) aspects of human experience. In conscious aging, there is the opportunity to pause and turn inward. It is a time when people ask themselves the deepest questions.

Conscious aging involves a greater understanding of changes in our identity. Rudolph Tanzi, a Harvard physician and expert on Alzheimer’s, expressed his view that it is important to cultivate self-awareness and the development of self-observation. In his words:

Identity is self-awareness. You’re aware of the fact that you’re observing. You become aware of the watcher. You’re taking in sensory information, but rather than just doing that as an automaton, you’re aware of the fact that you’re someone taking in sensory information. You look in the mirror and you say, oh, that’s me … It’s a whole other level of consciousness, where you are aware of being aware; you become the watcher of yourself. And this is where great things can happen, because this is where you can really tap into all of the jewels and prizes there are in the whole web of consciousness in the universe (Tanzi, 2011).

Tools that help to shift attention include meditation, contemplative prayer, journal writing, walks in nature, gardening with mindfulness, and somatic subtle-energy body practices. In each case, one clears space from the popular media, the many weapons of mass distraction, to be with one’s own consciousness in life-affirming ways. For example, one of the common challenges expressed by residents of The Redwoods Senior Center in Mill Valley, California, where IONS is conducting Conscious Aging workshops, is the frustration and loss of self-esteem around the need to move slower and in becoming more forgetful and clumsy at times. Taking time to reflect on one’s
critical self-talk when these things happen allows one to bring the inner critic into more conscious awareness and then to reframe these internal messages as more positive and self-compassionate messages.

**Intention**

A second element of transformative practice that applies to conscious aging involves cultivating intention. One can create intentions for a specific activity, an event, or for aging over time. One can inquire: “What matters most? What values do I want to adhere to?” Based on these reflections, one can craft an intentionality statement for their elder years so that when challenges and opportunities arise one will have developed an inner compass with which to navigate and make more conscious life choices.

Some may wish to engage in a life review, noting major moments of transformation that have led them to who they are and what gives them meaning (Schlitz, et al., 2008). The exploration of one’s personal narrative through writing will help clarify the meaning and purpose of one’s life as well as reveal its underlying spiritual dimensions. As the maxim attributed to philosopher Soren Kierkegaard suggests, “Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward.”

Clinical psychologist Rick Hanson notes that when we reflect on our lives, we can see them as an opportunity to experience the fullness of who we are. In his words, “If you know the movie is going to come to an end, it really motivates you to make it as good a movie as possible and to enjoy it as much as you can” (Hanson, 2011).

**Repetition**

Another aspect of worldview transformation practice involves the repetition of new behaviors and the building of new habits. Learning to live with awareness and intention, compassion and forgiveness, leads to new ways of being. Just like efforts to build up a new muscle group require repeated exercise, so too does the process of conscious aging. Neuroscience offers us hope that such new habits are possible as we lay down new neural pathways that can help us to see the world and ourselves in new ways.

**Guidance**

Finding sources of inspiration and guidance can help people to live into conscious aging. One can find guidance to understand the nature of change, both from outside and from turning inward. A skilled teacher, a study group, a social network that supports the explorations that are arising can all be helpful. As Mingtong Gu (2011), a qi gong master, expressed to us in an interview, “Life is about change, and so embracing change in all its expressions gives us
the opportunity to learn to listen and learn about how impermanence underlies all life.”

Integrating Practice into Everyday Life

People often think of transformative or spiritual practices in relationship to certain places or times of the season. In the move to conscious aging, life itself becomes the primary practice—whether or not a formal practice remains a part of the process. Aging offers a time for increasing self-understanding. As Moody (2003) pointed out, however, to see this opportunity requires the ability to see these possibilities and to find a community of mutual support and encouragement that helps in the emerging new insights and practices. Finding sources of social support, whether in virtual or proximal social settings, offers a way of living into new patterns and behaviors, everyday and always.

Moving from I to We

While aging is a personal process, conscious aging sees the shift as more than a personal quest—all about personal achievement or some outcome for personal benefit—to a process move from I to we (Vieten, Amorok, & Schlitz, 2006). In other words, the conscious aging practice infuses one’s life, as many people report the wish for and actively work toward the transformation of their community. Altruism and compassion born of shared destiny rather than duty or obligation can emerge here.

Bill Plotkin, Ph.D., describes the development task of elders as having at least five components: (a) defending and nurturing the innocence and wonder of children, (b) mentoring and initiating adolescents, (c) mentoring adults in their soul work, (d) guiding the evolution or transformation of the culture, and (e) maintaining the balance between human culture and the greater Earth community. In doing these things, elders embrace and engender wholeness (Plotkin, 2008).

As people move from equanimity and self-compassion in the face of life’s challenges to a daily sense of wonder and awe, even the most mundane aspects of life become sacred in their own way. Living deeply makes personal transformation contagious. As people share their experiences and their presence of being with others, a collective transformation that is more than the sum of its parts can emerge. Individual transformations combine to create collective transformation, which in turn stimulates more individual transformations and so on, in an ever-widening expansion of our human potential.

At the same time, people can become so immersed in a sense of oneness and shared responsibility that they lose sight of the complementary movement from we to me. The results of this can range from a cult mentality to becoming so fatigued by helping others that people forget to care for themselves. Caretakers for the sick or elderly can have compassion fatigue. Equally as important as
serving one’s family or community is discovering how best to channel one’s unique combination of talents, resources, experiences, and skills in a way that serves one’s well-being.

Living Deeply

Once the dance between self-actualization and self-transcendence, formal and informal practice, and receiving and giving come more naturally, people report an experience of “living deeply.” As people grow older, they can bring greater awareness to the transformative process that allows a deeper experience of their life journey. Conscious aging offers the opportunity to look at relationships—to heal, forgive, and experience compassion for self and others. Living deeply is about growing in wisdom.

Death and Beyond?

Contemplating death is a vital aspect of conscious aging. Although it is an area surrounded in fear, it is an inevitable part of transformation. Holding a cosmology of death helps to create a frame in which to hold our mortality. For scientist Rick Hanson (2011), death is part of evolution. In his words:

I think every organism knows how to die—whether it’s a deer that just relaxes in the mouth of a lion or the rock climber who relaxed and opened to his death once he surrendered to it. I think about the ways in which the death of creatures—plants, animals, microbes, and certainly humans—is actually important from an evolutionary standpoint because it clears the way for the young to come forward and it enables a species itself to adapt and improve itself over time.

An important part of positive transformations in worldview involves reflection on one’s own cosmology of what happens after we die. There are many maps or worldviews on this question, revealing a wide range of viewpoints. In considering them, people can find comfort and a set of possibilities for their understanding. Philosopher and physician Deepak Chopra (2011) explained his worldview when he considered the question of what happens when we die:

You actualize through the brain and body … You’re the user of your brain and your body. Of course, every time you have a mental event, there’s a neural representation of that. You can see where it’s happening as a spark of electrochemical activity. But your memories are not in your brain. They are actualized in your brain. And neither are your desires, imagination, intentions … anything that makes us human—insight, intuition, memory, inspiration. These are qualities of our soul, and the soul is not in space-time. Now, in order for this to be meaningful, it can’t be a theory. It has to be a realization, it has to be an experience, and that’s what all spiritual discipline is about. Some people accidentally bump into their transcendent self through spiritual discipline … If you do practice, you start to experience
that there is an inner being here, and it is not in the body. The body is in the inner being. Just like memory is in that inner being. When people ask: “Where do I go after I die,” the answer is: “There is no place to go; you are there now.”

**NEXT STEPS**

In this article, we have considered how bringing conscious awareness to the aging process can support positive transformations in worldview that can enhance quality of life as one grows older. Aging invites changes in worldview as people go through developmental stages that connect to body, mind, society, and spirit. Bringing awareness to these processes can lead to enhanced personal and social experiences and behaviors. It can also lead to an expanded sense of self and the world. Based on a naturalistic model that was developed through a series of qualitative and quantitative studies on worldview transformation, we explored the ways in which conscious awareness can inform our experiences of aging. This leads us to emerging new directions for our program, which include the development of a curriculum on conscious aging as well as participation in the public dialogue about aging and transformation.

**CONSCIOUS AGING AND WORLDVIEW TRANSFORMATION CURRICULUM**

As we apply the worldview transformation model to the issues of aging, we can see that there is a core competency or skill set that can be developed if people hold the intention to grow and develop. It involves the capacity to comprehend and communicate an understanding that information about the world around us is perceived and delivered through the filters of our personal and cultural worldviews. It is the understanding that beliefs about aging, dying, and beyond are embedded within individual and collective frames of reference and that other people hold different worldviews. It is knowing that our worldviews or models of reality are largely unconscious and that jointly engaging in practices that raise our awareness of the beliefs and assumptions we hold can allow us to better navigate encounters that inform the aging process.

To help people develop the self-awareness and self-management skills around conscious aging and the social-awareness and interpersonal skills needed to establish and maintain positive relationships, the research and education team of the Institute of Noetic Sciences has developed a blended-learning curriculum. In this process, our goal is to focus on the development of awareness about how who we are shapes what we know about the world and to encourage examination of knowledge-formation processes themselves.

As an experiential curriculum, the study of conscious aging and worldview transformation involves exploration of the pivotal role that worldview, perspective, or point of view plays in perception, understanding, and behavior. It utilizes elements that encourage self-reflection, personal
exploration, self-discovery, and collective learning experiences that encourage the cultivation of new ways of understanding self and others. Participants in the curriculum are encouraged to reflect and share their worldviews around aging while gaining tools for understanding the worldviews of others. The goal of the conscious aging curriculum is to apply the latest research and practices in consciousness studies and worldview transformation to the challenges and opportunities of aging. The format of our education programs is to use direct learning and guided self-reflection to help participants cultivate metacognition, including awareness of worldviews, cognitive flexibility, and a capacity to hold conflicting information, as well as social and emotional skills involving perspective taking, connectedness, and prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

Over the course of the lessons, the curriculum (a) introduces the concept of worldview, (b) helps participants understand how their perspective or point of view on aging influences what they perceive and therefore how they act and react, (c) provides experiences (such as optical illusions, paradoxical situations, and contact with differing perspectives) that are meant to increase cognitive flexibility and empower participants to examine their own assumptions, (d) uses different types of narrative to explore the way people make meaning and communicate their experiences about aging, and (e) brings increasing awareness to thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, particularly when presented with conflicting perspectives or points of view about aging, dying, and what may lie beyond. Sample questions for exploration include the following:

- Where do beliefs about aging and dying come from?
- Have your beliefs about aging changed over time?
- How can your beliefs limit your experience?
- How is it helpful to consider multiple perspectives?
- Why do people make stereotypes about aging?
- What does it mean to participate in a conscious community around aging?
- How do our relationships help us to see the world and ourselves in new ways?
- How can you connect more deeply to others?
- How can we reframe our critical self-talk, when we encounter challenges of aging such as clumsiness, slow motion, or forgetfulness, to more self-compassionate and forgiving messages?
- What were the triggers for worldview transformation in your life, and what lessons have you learned from them?
- What intentions do you want to manifest in your elder years?
- How does an evolving awareness about aging inform how we live our lives with greater self-compassion and inner guidance?
- How are you finding a larger purpose in life as an elder while also balancing a reduction in your obligations and limitations on your physical and mental capacities?
- What truly has heart and meaning for you? What matters most?
As we further consider the implications of our research and its potential translation into education and communications, we have begun to participate more actively in the national conversation about conscious aging. We are using our model of worldview transformation, informed by the interviews and expert opinions, to help engage people in their own inquiry and to build communities of learning and exploration. We offer a series of teleseminars that highlight experts in the area of conscious aging and host the participants in community dialogues to help provide a context of encouragement and mutual support. As we engage with others in the conversation about conscious aging, the goal is to increase awareness about the benefits of aging, to reduce the fear that surrounds aging and dying, to facilitate communication, and to help foster a new way of holding the natural progress of life in all its rich complexity.

While early models of human development focused on child development and psychological maturity was considered to be largely complete by adulthood, modern theories recognize that we continue to develop throughout the lifespan. The question then becomes, How can we use the challenges and opportunities of aging to cultivate wisdom and to live deeply? In the end, it is not as much about aging itself as it is about fostering continual growth and development during this fertile time. Each stage of life offers new fodder for transformation of worldview and consciousness. Our Conscious Aging Worldview curriculum applies the research, tools, and practices of consciousness studies to the issues of aging. As noted by authors Valle and Mohs (2004):

Life, death, and grief are everywhere, whether it is the birth of a new idea, heartbreak at the death of a child, or a leaf falling from a tree. In this way, we begin to accept and celebrate the constant flow of life’s transitions rather than fearing the next turn in the road. Thus, to the extent that we can let go into the mystery of life, we find true peace and love in the aging process. (p. 194)

References


The Authors

Marilyn Schlitz, Ph.D., is President and CEO of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, where she has worked for 15 years. Her work focuses on psychophysiology, cross cultural healing, and consciousness studies. She has given lectures, conducted workshops, and taught all around the country. She completed her training in psychology, behavioral and social science, and philosophy at Stanford University, University of Texas, San Antonio and Wayne State University, Detroit. She received her Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Texas, Austin. She has been featured in various writings, interviews, and videos. As well, she has authored and co-authored numerous books, such as Living Deeply: The Art of Science of Transformation and Consciousness and Healing: Integral Approaches to Mind-Body Medicine.

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Kathleen Erickson-Freeman, IONS’ Elder Education and Planned Giving Manager, has developed programs for the Donor Relations and Education teams for over ten years on. She currently works with IONS Visionary Circle members (those who wish to leave a legacy for IONS beyond their lifetimes) and conducts business development and outreach for the Worldview Literacy project, including inter-generation dialogues in collaboration with The World Café, global outreach with Cross Cultural Journeys, and other elder education programs related to conscious aging. Kathleen has a BA in Psychology and Masters-level study in Special Education from California State University, Hayward, a Teaching Credential from Mills College, and has completed two years of advanced study in the cross-cultural components of leadership and the
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**Personal Message from Marilyn Schlitz**

As I personally live into conscious aging, my worldview has been informed by the depth and insight of many great teachers. These include masters from different world traditions, healthcare practitioners, friends facing end of life, and researchers studying the transformative nature of death, dying, and beyond. For almost two decades, my team and I have conducted interviews, sponsored lectures, created educational programs, conducted research, and engaged the consciousness community in conversations on worldview transformation. In this process, we have been led to an ever-expanding appreciation for the aging process and a growing awareness about different ways of understanding death. We have also compiled a comparative archive on people’s beliefs about what happens after they die, learning about different cosmologies people hold. Through these acts, including the writing of this essay, we have found ourselves moved by a great calling to help reduce the suffering that many people experience around death. We embrace our participation in the emerging movement on transpersonal gerontology; it is soul work for which we are most grateful.

Marilyn Mandala Schlitz, Ph.D.
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THE DECEMBER YEARS OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT: In my book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* I described the work of the October and November years of life. While I mentioned December, I could not go into detail because I had not yet experienced what that is about. What you will read is based on a talk I gave to a group of people helpers about December work. The changes in body, emotions, and mind are noted and detailed. In Spiritual Eldering an emphasis has always been placed on coming to terms with mortality which, in the December years, takes on a much more imminent power.

Oh God, do not abandon me. Please hurry to my side.

I think these words express a lot of what happens to people when they get to the December years. That is what I want to talk about with you. In the past when I spoke to you about the work in spiritual eldering, we talked about the fact that there are not any decent models around for the time when you are considered redundant population. I can imagine that some of the number crunchers would be saying something about how Medicare spent so much money on older folks keeping them alive. A much more life sustaining model would say that you use whatever you can of contemplative awareness to do your life review; to go back over the past in order to see whatever still needs to be fixed. You do this in your relationships with people by the time you have entered into elder mind.

So what do you do in your November years? Well, that is when you are doing what Jimmy and Roslyn Carter, for instance, are doing: paying back, mentoring people, teaching people, giving over the wisdom that they had learned during their lifetime. About these things I have talked a lot before, but I have not talked about the December years.

When I wrote the book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller 1995), it was quite a while ago. I began when I was sixty, so that was twenty four years ago. I did not really have a sense of what the December time was, except that I would say that if you want to do your Eldering you have to come to terms with your mortality. It is so nice and abstract to say, “come to terms with your mortality,” but when I was on a gurney being taken into the operating room, I was coming to terms with dying. It is a whole other different story. It was not so much that I was talking about the cortex, at that time; rather it was about what was going on in the limbic and the reptilian brain. Still

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it was not the same situation, because the outcome of the operation was a good
prognosis so that was not so heavy.

Now when I am in my December years, I find that it pays a great deal to watch
what your body is telling you. It was at the time when I was beginning this
work that I asked, why was I depressed when I was so successful in whatever I
was doing. I realized that it was because I was overriding the body’s signals at
that time. I figured that I could kick ass as if I were 40 or younger and I saw
that this was no longer possible. The message was coming, but I did not pay
attention to it until I began to ask the questions about Eldering. So what is
happening in the December years? I want to say that thank God I have been
granted a long December because my December should be over by the figures
that I have of every seven years representing a month of life here.

I first was introduced to the issues of Eldering by Gerald Heard in his
remarkable book *The Five Ages Of Man* in which he talks about the those
December years although he does not call them by that name. That is the time
for *involutional melancholia*. It is like a creeping up kind of sadness, a
poignancy of every day. Driving up here and seeing the aspen glow, I get the
sense of how many more times will I get to see this beautiful thing. There is the
element that is not nostalgia for the past but nostalgia for the future. It is like
saying, how much of that beauty will I still have?

If I watch the changes in my body, first of all it is much slower in repairing even
the little injuries. I pulled a muscle carrying something heavy and it took me
more than a week to get to the place where it did not hurt anymore. So it is a
lot slower. I have a sense that the cells of the body give a message, “We are
tired.” Life feels like a weight at this point. It is not unhappy, it is good, but it
takes a weight. So I have to get up, so I have to do this. I will do it, I like to do
it, I want to do it. It has a sense of extra weight on the shoulders.

There is a level in which the cohort of my buddies in life is diminishing. There is a
great deal of pleasure in the phone calls that I have with old buddies and being on
Skype with them and hanging out. What do we want to talk about? At one time
we would always talk about how we would fix the world, what we would do.
Now it goes a lot more, was not it fun when we did thus-and such? There is a kind
of reminiscing. There is also sense in which when we do the organ recital to each
other—what is working, what is not working so well—we find that young people
would not understand at all what we are talking about. But, our buddies do.

Now on the other hand, we have talked about the idea that extended lifespan
calls for extended awareness. I have that sense of the larger issues being more
on the foreground of my mind now: What will happen to the world and in what
shape will I leave it? Will it get better? Is there any way in that system to which
we give allegiance and want to be citizens in, which is old and obsolete and
broken—is there any way that system can be fixed?

Somehow the people do not look at the dollar bill anymore to see the eye of
God on top of the pyramid looking at what they are doing on Wall Street.
Instead of *E Pluribus Unum*, we have a great deal of polarization among us. So these are the kinds of things that make me reflect at this time and the question is what do I want to dream about? I want to dream about the young people whom I meet from time to time who seem to be so full of good dreams, who want to help the world.

I want to say something about gravestones. If I had my “druthers” (and we are not in an agreement about it) but if I had my preferences, I would like to have the gravestone made, not of stone, but of wood, and engraved. When it rots away it is time that it should rot away. Or it might be made of adobe and adobe only lasts as long as you keep it going, and if there is no one there to keep the adobe going, it will be time to be finished with that too. There is a sense of how we want to be somehow enshrined in permanence with our presentation of self. Look at the Pharaohs and look at Roman emperors and look at all the guys who want to make sure that the idol they created of themselves would last for the rest of the time. Someone once said he was a self-made man and he worshiped his maker. You get the sense of what it is when we are concerned about the presentation of self.

Previously, if someone said something nasty about me, I would want to write a letter to the editor, fix my entry in the Wikipedia, but now I do not care anymore. From time to time I have a conversation with the Zalman I used to be, and I am sure that I would not today approve completely of all the things that he did. But you know what he said to me when I talked to him last, “Don’t you dare, don’t you dare betray me. At the time I did what I had to do. I was not in the same place where you are now. You are not in the same place where I am now. Keep honoring that.” This is what I feel really strongly about in the life review, namely that this is good. All the phases of life with all their flaws are what they are and that is okay.

There is something that is called an “event horizon.” That is a word that they use in cosmology, but I believe it is also about human beings. My event horizon was a large one. Years ago I felt I was about 30 years ahead of the pack. That is to say, when people were thinking one thing, I was thinking what would be the growing edge with things that would be ahead of the rest of the time. Today when people ask me, what do you expect about the future, my event horizon is smaller. I still have a little mileage left, but it is not to be able to see around the corner of time as I, at one time, was able to see with much greater clarity.

I will tell you a story about event horizons. There was a man who came to his rabbi to ask him for business advice. The rabbi said, “Go ahead, you will succeed.” On the way home he stopped at the house of the rabbi’s disciple and he asked him about his business, and the rabbi’s disciple said, “You will lose your shirt.” So now he said, “To whom should I listen? Should I listen to a great rabbi or should I listen to his disciple?” He listened to the rabbi and in the end he lost his shirt. So he comes back to the disciple and says, “Could you explain this to me?” The disciple said, “Yes. My master only could see till the end of his life and by the end of his life you had done very well, but he could not see beyond. I could see beyond and I knew you would lose your shirt.”
think that is the issue of the event horizon. I cannot say that people in the December years have a large event horizon, to be able to see farther.

Another issue I have talked about before, especially for people doing social work and doing work with elders, is how much elders are touch deprived. The sexuality that people are talking about when they are young is not the same as when they are getting older. From time to time you hear stories of a home for the aged where Mrs. Klein and Mr. Rosenberg were cuddling up and the children did not like it. They had their loneliness and all that they wanted was their cuddles with each other. I think the same thing applies also to hospice. There was a friend of ours who passed away while she and her partner were lying in bed together. So the issue of recognizing that whatever we can do, whether it is holding a hand or a hug, is important.

My wife, Eve, tells the sequel.

"Her partner said afterward, when we all came in, ‘I went with her as far as they would let me and then I had to come back. And all I can tell you is, she is completely free and full of joy.’ Then he looked around and said, ‘This was what I was struggling ten years for—that I should not go there. Was I nuts?’"

So you get the sense that by the time the December stuff comes, that the sting of death that we experience when we think of emergency room and saving lives at all costs – the sting of death is less. Those of us who have done the kind of medical will, how many of us have said no resuscitation, do not do me any favors. I do not want any extraordinary ways to keep me alive. There is an equanimity that comes. If it were to happen today, okay. I still have a few things that I want to see done for my children and some uncompleted things.

When Freud was saying that we are driven by the two instincts, libido and thanatos, I had the sense that thanatos is not so much a death instinct as the instinct to completion. If you remember, the Zeigarnik effect in psychology means that you want to create closure. I think that that is very important. People call me up and ask me, do I want to do this, do I want to do that, and I say no thanks, no, no, no. Those are the very same things that I would have said yes to with alacrity in other years. Libido wants to open up more possibilities for life. Where I am right now, I want to close them off. I want to say, “No, I do not want to carry that on my shoulders. I do not even want to look ahead for that. I have other nice things that I want to look ahead for, but they are not now, not what you propose to me.” I hate the fact and I want to spell this out, that people trot me out when they need to have a Somebody out there. I have taught a lot of students and they are good students and the next echelon is more important than I. When they want to interview me I feel “do not do me a favor, interview my students. Get the ones who are next in line, who are going to do the real job. They are the ones who should get the attention.”

Terry Gross not too long ago, had an interview with an Anglican Bishop. When she asked him the question, “What is your prayer life like these days,” he said, “It is not verbal. I do not have much to do with words anymore. In fact
the best prayer that I have is to sit back and let God love me.” I started to tear up and I wrote him a letter to thank him for what he said, because this is the feeling that I have. We say God so loves the world, God loves us, God loves you, but we never sit down and let God love us. I think that is a very important part of the December work.

Also in December the body wants to be more sedentary than before. There still is a contemplative hunger, a hungry to spread the mind wider, to go to origins and to try to figure out the divine purposes. The best joy that I have at this point is to have these kinds of conversations with Eve, sometimes with my children, sometimes with some friends about what the nature of reality is all about. That contemplative hunger is there still.

I am going to read you a couple of things. This is from the end of the Book of Ecclesiastes; my translation is not King James.

Then come the creaky days.
Years creep up
in which one feels like saying,
“I have no taste for them.”
For the sunlight darkens in the eyes,
Dimmed is the light of the moon and the stars,
and the vision is patchy
like a cloudy sky after a rain.
The hands and arms, the guards of the house,
begin to tremble,
and the legs, like battle-tired soldiers,
are unsure in their step.

The grinding mills, the teeth, are fewer,
in the windows of the mind fog up.
The lips–doors that open to the marketplace
want to stay closed,
and the sounds heard get duller.
One’s sleep is shallow and easily disturbed
by the twitter of a bird,
and the gates of song get clogged.

The back is bent,
And the urge to mate is weakened
as a person shuffles towards his eternal home.

When I was asked to participate in a CD, distributed with accompanying book, (Graceful Passages, 2003) in which the music and words were to be played to the dying, I did this piece. Here are the words without the music at this point.

God, You made me.
From before I was born,
You took me through my life.
You supported me.
You were there with me when I wasn’t there with You.
There were times I was sick and You healed me.
There were times I was in despair
and You gave me hope.
There were times when I felt betrayed
that I could still turn to You.

It was a wonderful life. I loved and I was loved.
I sang, I heard music, I saw flowers,
I saw sunrises and sunsets.
Even in places when I was alone,
You, in my heart, helped me turn loneliness
into precious solitude.
I look back over the panorama of my life;
what a wonderful privilege this was!

I still have some concerns for people in the family,
For the world, for the planet.
I put them in Your Blessed Hands.
I trust that whatever in the Web of Life
that needed me to be there
Is now completed.
I thank You for taking the burden from me,
And I thank You for keeping me in the Light.
As I let go, and let go, and let go... and let go.

Why did I agree to talk to you about this? Because I wanted you to understand
what it is like when you are in the December years so that when you work with
people, you do not give them the kind of false hope when you tell them to buck
up, to be strong and so on. I can tell you how I would say, “Get the hell out of
here.” What do you know of how I feel? Why do you tell me this? What I now
need is for you to understand who I am, what I am and to recognize that you,
too, will someday be in this same situation if God helps you to extend your
lifespan. Your body will still be in pretty good shape, but it will start giving you
the messages that you get in the December years.

There is still another life phase that I cannot talk about as of yet. Perhaps, if
some day, when I am in hospice, you will want to come around and hear a final
report from me. In the meantime I am glad to have spent this time with you.

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The Author

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi was born in Zholkiew, Poland in 1924. His family fled the Nazi oppression in 1938 and arrived in New York City in 1941. He was ordained as a rabbi by HaBaD-Lubavitch in 1947, earned his MA in psychology from Boston University in 1956, and a Doctor of Hebrew Letters (DHL) from Hebrew Union College in 1968. His DHL dissertation was subsequently published as *Spiritual Intimacy: Counseling in the Hassidic tradition*.

Professor emeritus at both Temple University (Professor of Jewish Mysticism and Psychology of Religion) and Naropa University (World Wisdom Chair), he is primarily known as the father of both Jewish Renewal and the spiritual eldering movements. A participant in ecumenical dialogues throughout the world, including the widely influential dialogue with the Dalai Lama, documented in the book, *The Jew in the Lotus*, his many published works include *Jewish with Feeling: Guide to a Meaningful Jewish Practice* with co-author Joel Segel and *A Heart Afire: Stories and Teachings of the Early Hasidic Masters* with co-author Netanel Miles-Yepez. He continues to be active in mentoring his many students the world over, incorporating wide-ranging knowledge of the spiritual technology developed by peoples all over the planet. He is committed to a post-triumphalist, ecumenical, and Gaian approach.
GETTING HIP

Last year I had an accident. I fell on my hip. There it was … a broken hip. I am eighty years old now, so I guess it comes with the territory. But that broken hip was my own fault. I am in a wheelchair much of the time, and that day I was transferring from an armchair to the wheelchair. I did not focus carefully, that is I did not bring my full awareness to bear on what I was doing, so I fell.

This is a dilemma for me. If I pay attention to my body full time, even when I am transferring, then my consciousness does not get to be with my soul because I am attending to my body as most people do.

So I am in the hospital getting my hip repaired. Hospitals are body-oriented. It is the body shop. To most of the hospital staff I am the old guy in Room 322 with a broken hip. That is who I am in their minds. They are the nurses and doctors, they’re the professionals and they must know, right?

But, don’t we also have a spiritual identity? Aren’t we also souls? The overwhelming mindset of the hospital is, no, we are not souls, we’re just bodies. Now, my view is that I am in this incarnation to learn about my true self, to learn about my soul. Along the way I’ve also learned a lot about strokes and broken hips. I’ve found you can think about them in many different ways.

These bodies really capture our attention. As our parents impressed upon us, you better watch out or you’re going to hurt yourself if you do not attend to your body! But from another point of view, the workings of the body are grist for the mill to get to the soul. And it is tough work. If you think learning to swim is hard, it ain’t nothin’ compared to this.

The body is out there and the soul, the “I”, is in here. To get into my soul I must turn my attention inward instead of outward. But I have to turn it selectively inward, because at the same time the body is demanding attention and I better decide where my foot should go, otherwise I am going to get myself killed. So, I attend to my body when it’s time and the rest of the time I work on being a soul.

A good analogy for body and soul is a coach with horses and a coachman, and a rider inside the coach. The horses are desires. The coachman is the ego, the
“I” that controls the desires and looks where he is going (and makes sure the foot does not go in the wrong place). But who is the passenger riding in the coach? It’s our soul. “Coachman, would you stop please?” “Coachman, you’re going a little too fast.”

I am riding in my coach, and now and then my coach needs a grease job or a new bearing or a joint replaced. I was just at a coach shop for a hip joint, and they know everything about coaches. But that is not who I am, because I am inside the coach riding along, merrily, merrily, merrily….

On the outside I am recovering from a hip replacement operation, but inside I am dancing. I look like an old fart but I am dancing inside. And what a joyful, joyful dance. In India it is called the līla, the dance or the play of the soul. And you can join in anytime, because it is always going on here in this moment and it never stops.

Did I lose my soul in the hospital? Well, maybe I lost my connection with my soul for awhile, but I did not lose my soul. Where could it go? I’m still here. I have a new hip. I’m even hipper than I was.

**BEING STROKED**

In 1997 I had a stroke. I was stroked and I almost died. I became a strokee. That’s how I came by the wheelchair.

At the time I had a lot of people surrounding me, doctors and nurses and friends and relatives. They all had long faces and they kept saying, “Oh, you poor guy, you have had a stroke!” And by absorbing their mind-sets, I started to think I was a “poor guy,” just another stroke victim. The whole view of a stroke as a medical disaster was projected onto me. It was coming from almost everybody – except for the cleaning woman. Whenever she came in my room she was totally present with me. She knew.

I got very depressed after the stroke. My faith was shaking like a leaf in a high wind. I would look at the picture of my guru on the hospital wall and say, “Where were you when I had this stroke? Were you out to lunch or something?”

And then it began to shift. I started thinking about it in a different way. I said, “Well, maybe I had this stroke so my soul will learn from it. What if this is a blessing in disguise?”

I started to get into that. I looked at the effects of the stroke and there were few that could not also be seen as positive. Even my aphasia, my hesitant speech and searching for words, made me quiet a lot more of the time. Meditators think it is good to quiet the mind. Ah, ha! The stroke had made my mind quiet. Good.

I learned about dependency. Years ago I wrote a book about service with Paul Gorman called, “How Can I Help?” Now I would have to call it, “How Can
You Help Me?” I used to take pride in driving my car, but now someone else drives and I enjoy looking at the trees and the sunset and I do not have to look at the road.

After the stroke I would give a talk and I’d be stumbling a lot over words. Afterwards people would come up and say, “That was such a wonderful talk. It was so spacious. It gave me time to think about each thing you said.” Ah, hah!

The more I thought about it, I realized that the stroke was just a stroke. But my reaction to the stroke was something else. The saving grace was being able to see it from the soul perspective. Instead of saying, “Oh no, I have had a stroke!” I got around to, “Well, let us see what is graceful in this stroke?” I began to treat it as what was happening in the moment. And I’ve found contentment in the stroke just being with it. I mean, I would not wish for a stroke, but here it is.

ROLES TO SOULS

In our consciousness these are two different points of view. There is the ego and there is the soul, our spiritual self. They are two different planes of consciousness. From the spiritual vantage point we’re all souls who have come into these incarnations. You take birth and this is your incarnation. Here you are. You are an individual being.

When I would travel back and forth from America to India, I’d land in New Delhi and take a bus up to this village in the mountains. The people in that village knew they were souls. One was sweeping the road and another was the governor. The governor was not just a governor and the sweeper was not just busy being a sweeper. They had that role for this incarnation but they also identified themselves as souls. I’d get back on the plane, and when they opened the door in New York everybody thought they were their roles. It was just back and forth, roles to souls, souls to roles.

We get so deeply into our roles because of the pull of the incarnation that we forget we’re souls. All the sensations, emotions and complications of being in a body, and we forget. We think, “I am a man, I am a woman, I am from California, I am a mother, a father, a widow, a child,” a something. I have got to be something, don’t I?

Think of all the ways you identify yourself with what you do: “I am a teacher. I am a doctor, I’m a scientist. I’m a cook, a Jew, a Christian, a Moslem, a stockbroker. I’m an achiever. I am a spiritual seeker (that one can carry you for years). I am retired.”

All that is the ego. The ego is who we think we are. It’s a thought. Your ego is a cluster of thoughts about how you identify yourself, thoughts about different roles that you play in society.
When we meet someone we ask, “How do you do? What do you do?” Is what you do the same as who you are? Every one of our roles is just a thought-form. We confuse our souls with our roles. You don’t see me as a soul, you see me as a body, you see me as Ram Dass, a role. What does it matter whether I am a cellist, or a pilot or a teacher? When you strip away the roles this outer form is just the body. Who I am is just here. Instead of “How do you do?” how about, “How do you be?” Our inner being is beyond form.

When you live in your soul and your heart is open you can awaken other souls. You go into a grocery store and it’s like a temple. They are all souls. Some of them think they are customers, some think they are workers. You get to the checkout person and your eyes lock for an instant – Are you here? I’m here. Wow, a fellow soul!

If you have children, your children are souls. They’re just in the role of children and you’re in the role of mother or father.

When you’re with a dying person and you see them as a soul, that transition from body to spirit is one that is easy to make. If a caregiver is identified with their soul it is easy to see the dying person as a soul and to ease their transition.

**REMEMBER, BE HERE NOW**

When we plumb the moment, this moment, not back then, not the future, but this moment, we get deeper and deeper and deeper into the universal heart of being. Finally, it blossoms into everything and nothing. It’s all in this moment. This moment is always here. Now is eternal.

It’s so extraordinary how near people are to their deeper being. It’s just a thought away. And the thoughts that take us away create so much suffering. The thought, “I am this body,” is also suffering. I might think, “Well my body used to be able to do this, my hair did not use to be gray, I used to be stronger, I used to be thinner, I used to be … whatever.” That is suffering because the body is what it is. We do everything we can think of to stay safe and healthy but illness, age and accidents still affect us. The body is in time. If we live in the moment we are not in time.

**NO AGE**

In this culture aging is a dirty word. Youth is the thing. Old people make themselves up to look like young people. You think you have to do it because youth is what is “in.” It is all about social roles in our cultural context. Still, it is a fact of nature that the body inevitably ages. How you think about it is up to you. How we perceive aging deeply affects our psyche and our sense of well-being.

I was visiting an old friend in India who I think of as a very loving person. He looked at me and said, “Ram Dass, you look so old!” I was so offended I was
ready to fight him on the spot, because I come from a culture where age is shame. But he was complimenting me, really complimenting me, because in India age brings wisdom and respect. Old age in India is the time to go on pilgrimage and finish your spiritual work.

**The Time Bind**

If you say, “I’m a retired person, I’ve retired from my role,” you are looking back at your life. It’s retrospective, it’s life in the rear view mirror. That is called time binding. It causes us to focus on the past and, of course, to worry about what comes next. Thinking backwards and forwards, being caught in the past and worrying about the future is a form of self-imposed suffering.

Aging is not a culmination. It’s not the end of the line, a time to look back. It’s a time to just be present. The present is ageless. Being in the moment, just being here with what is, is timeless.

In the moment there is just presence, there’s no future or past, we’re just here, happy to be here in the moment. If you’re not time binding, you don’t have to do anything, you don’t have to go anywhere, you’re just here.

A monk is being pursued by a tiger in the jungle. The tiger chases him off a cliff. Another tiger is below. The monk grabs onto a bush with one hand. Next to the bush he spies a wild strawberry growing out of the cliff. With his free hand he plucks the wild strawberry. How sweet that wild strawberry!

**Just a Moment**

That poignancy, that joy you get from being completely in the moment, brings contentment. Contentment is a practice. It’s different from satisfaction. It’s not a feeling of accomplishment from doing something. Contentment is just being complete in the moment.

I’m content with taking a nap, without thinking I should be doing something else. I’m even content to have a broken hip that is healing. It’s part of the body growing old. But I am just here.

When I first traveled to India in 1966 I was just another westerner visiting a foreign country. I was with a friend traveling in a Land Rover. We had canned tuna fish and Vivaldi tapes, beds and all kinds of western amenities. We looked out through the windows at this foreign culture.

Then we came to Benares, the holy city where Hindus go to die. There were people walking the streets with leprosy and all kinds of illnesses, just waiting to die. They each had a pouch, a little bundle of cloth which held the coins for their funeral pyre, to pay for the wood to burn their body.
As we drove through this city I thought, “These people have no hospital, they have no support system, they’re just waiting to die.” These depressing thoughts and the ubiquitous poverty made me feel sick. I went to the hotel and hid under the bed.

Six months later I visited Benares again. It was the same scene, but in those six months I had been living in a Hindu temple up in the Himalayas under the tutelage of a guru. Now, instead of being just a westerner I was maybe a Hind-Jew, maybe a little Buddh-ish. Instead of seeing ‘those poor people’, instead of being overwhelmed and pushing away their pain, I could stop and look in their eyes.

I saw two things. First, they looked at me with compassion as if I were a hungry ghost, a homeless spirit wandering from place to place. And second, they themselves were content.

How could they be content amidst all this suffering? They were content because if a Hindu dies in Benares by the holy river Ganges, Shiva whispers in your ear and liberates you. They were in the right place at the right time. They were dying and where else would a Hindu want to die?

That contentment really got to me. How could they be so content? It conflicted with all my western values. My western life had always been about achievement, wanting, desiring, doing more, getting more. I felt I was always in the wrong place at the wrong time because there must be something better. I was forever collecting the next achievement. But those people in Benares had something I hadn’t been able to collect: contentment.

Contentment is not a high priority in the west. I guess we’re afraid the wheel of progress will grind to a halt if everybody is content. We’ve all pushed and achieved and realized our American dreams. That’s all right. But when we’re older at least we have a chance to be content. We can enjoy just being where we’re. There is a lot to be said for that.

Think of the kinds of experiences that give you a feeling of contentment. Maybe it is being in nature, listening to the birds or the sound of the waves on the shore, or looking at the night sky. Maybe it is listening to music or sinking into a warm bath. Those are experiences of touching your soul.

In the practice of yoga, contentment is one of the mind-sets you use to direct your consciousness toward oneness. Oneness is the name of the game in yoga, which means union. Contentment is an attitude of the soul rather than the ego or personality. You are looking at life from what I call the soul plane. I choose to call that deeper identity inside each of us, where we’re all just here, the soul.

**All You Need Is**

If I am a soul, when I look around at others I see their souls. After that I see the individual differences, men and women, rich and poor, attractive and
unattractive and all that stuff. When we recognize each other as souls, we’re seeing each other as aspects of the One. The emotion of merging, of becoming One, is love. Love is a way of pushing through into the One.

We treat love and hate and the other emotions like they’re all on the same level but they’re not. Hate, fear, lust, greed, jealousy – all that comes from the ego. Only love comes from the soul. When you identify with your soul you live in a loving universe. The soul loves everybody. It’s like the sun. It brings out the beauty in each of us. You can feel it in your heart.

The Author

Ram Dass, aka Richard Alpert, Ph.D., one of America’s most beloved spiritual figures, has made his mark on the world by teaching the path of the heart and promoting service in the areas of socially-conscious business practices and care for the dying. Ram Dass first went to India in 1967. He was still Dr. Richard Alpert, an eminent Harvard psychologist and psychedelic pioneer with Dr. Timothy Leary. In India, he met his guru, Neem Karoli Baba, affectionately known as Maharajji, who gave Ram Dass his name, which means “servant of God.” On his return from India, Ram Dass became a pivotal influence on a culture that has reverberated with the words “Be Here Now” ever since. With Be Love Now (HarperOne) Ram Dass completes his trilogy that began with Be Here Now in 1970 and continued with Still Here in 2004. Ram Dass’ spirit has been a guiding light for four generations, carrying along millions on the journey, helping free them from their bonds as he has worked his way through his own. He now makes his home in Maui.
RECOMMENDED READINGS FOR CONTINUING INQUIRY

Please note: In lieu of our regular features of Books Reviews and Books Our Editors are Reading we offer narrative reflections that provide continuing inquiry sources and resources relevant to the transpersonal gerontology movement. All authors embrace differing formats for their contribution.
Transpersonal Gerontology from a Contemplative Perspective

EDMUND SHERMAN, Ph.D.
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This is, in a sense, a dual perspective on the question of a transpersonal gerontology. One perspective is that of a professional gerontologist who has engaged in decades of research, teaching, and practice in the field of aging. The second is that of an octogenarian in his 84th year of life. Each of these perspectives informs the other as I think of contemplative aging and its relevance for a transpersonal gerontology.

When asked what books I would recommend on “aging, consciousness, and spirituality” I turn first to those professional gerontologists who influenced me most in the conception and development of Contemplative Aging as a book and an actual “way of being” in late life. Their research and writing on the spiritual dimension of aging provided validation for what I was finding in my own research, practice, and personal experience in aging. Tornstam’s Gerotranscendence and Atchley’s Spirituality and Aging are particularly validating in this respect. I was aware of their research well before the books were published and their findings provided important independent corroboration of the spiritual element in diverse populations. There were some reservations initially about Tornstam’s findings because his studies were done on large samples from Scandinavian populations of older persons. There was concern that older Americans might be different. However, Atchley pursued the same issues with older Americans, and in a specific focus-group study found strong corroborative evidence for three key features of Tornstam’s Gerotranscendence: (a) feeling a greater connection to the universe; a cosmic consciousness, (b) finding greater satisfaction in one’s inner life, and (c) having less fear of death.

Harry Moody has probably been the foremost proponent of a spiritual approach to aging of all the professional gerontologists in recent decades. His book, The Five Stages of the Soul, speaks not only to my own research and practice with American elders but with my own aging experience. The same can be said for Erik Erikson’s The Life Cycle Completed (1982) in which he provides
a more comprehensive exploration of the eighth and final stage of human
development. He identifies the essential style or “ritualization” of old age as
“philosophical for in maintaining some order and meaning in the dis-integration
of body and mind it can also advocate a durable hope in wisdom” (1982, p. 64).
In effect this calls for the development of something like a philosophical faith.
Actually, Karl Jaspers (1967), the twentieth century German philosopher,
proposed a philosophical faith commensurable with Erikson’s philosophical
style of old age. Jaspers claims that a philosophical faith is one which relies on
reason and experiential insight rather than revelation, prophesy, or doctrine. He
felt that such a faith could move one toward the Ground of Being, “the
incomprehensible, inconceivable, the all encompassing.”

The theme of Being is central to Contemplative Aging, as the subtitle of the
book, “A Way of Being,” indicates. In this regard Erich Fromm’s The Art of
Being (1992) described this contemplative turn that took place in his own later
life. At that time he began to meditate and he found mindfulness meditation to
be the most appropriate and meaningful for his old age. Mindfully following
the breath is central to this form of meditative practice, which is especially
fitting from a spiritual perspective. Not only is the breath essential to our very
existence, our being, but in several different languages the word breath is
synonymous with the word spirit, e.g., Greek (pneuma), Latin (spiritus),
Sanskrit (prana), and Hebrew (ruach).

Mindfulness is particularly well suited to late life when one slows down physically
and perceptually, conditions which enable one to pay more attention to one’s
immediate environment, thoughts, and actions. The breath is also helpful in applying
full awareness to such routine activities as walking, eating, watching, and thinking.
Living becomes more fully transparent and imbues even the most mundane activities
such as washing, sweeping, arranging and so on with a certain aura and sanctity,
which Atchley (1997) has called “the everyday mysticism” of old age.

In pursuing mindfulness as a central element in contemplative aging Thich
Nhat Hanh’s book, The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation, was
especially helpful in describing the details and nuances of mindfulness practice in
both meditation and daily living. From a similar Buddhist perspective Ram Dass
made a major contribution to the meaningfulness of contemplative aging
through his courageous and inspired recovery from a massive stroke, as
described in Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying (2000). He
contributed in two important ways. The first is his superb graphic description of
the soul in relation to the human ego and the Ground of Being, which he calls
“Awareness” (2000, p.27). It illustrates so well the crucial difference between the
transpersonal and the egoistic views in terms of spiritual development and
illumination. The second is his description of how he dealt with the dementia of
his eighty-six year old aunt with Alzheimer’s (2000, pp.93–94). It was a
supremely sensitive and benevolent approach to persons with late-life dementia,
and one that should be adopted more widely in gerontological practice.

Harry Moody’s The Five Stages of the Soul (1997) had particular relevance for
contemplative aging, most notably the latter three stages of his paradigm: The
Struggle, The Breakthrough, and The Return. In the spiritual quest of contemplative aging we are challenged by feelings of regret, disillusionment, depression, and often cynicism, which are largely the result of past events and behaviors. These feelings are confronted in a process known as the “life review” (Butler, 1963) and in a form called “existential reminiscence” (Sherman, 1991, p.175). In this form the older person attempts to (a) resolve troubling issues from the past, (b) arrive at a better understanding of one’s self, and (c) determine the meaning of one’s life.

The painful feelings and angst that are experienced in this process make up much of “The Struggle,” but from this struggle comes reconciliation with the past, which marks “The Breakthrough.” This leads to “The Return” in which: “Life goes on as before, and we go on with it in the ordinariness of everyday life” (Moody, 1997, p.38). However, through this process there has been an illumination and sanctity added to that ordinariness. The spiritual nature of this everyday mysticism is apparent as part of the gerotranscendence experience, but the nature of that meditation and how that spiritual consciousness is achieved experientially is still a challenging area for further pursuit. The theory of gerotranscendence, for now, has offered meaningful empirical findings that elders spend more time in “meditation” and develop a “cosmic consciousness.”

Wilber (1996) has described two forms of spirituality, which he identifies as: (a) Ascending and (b) Descending. He describes the Ascending path as “purely transcendental and otherworldly, tending to devalue the body, the senses, and the Earth, whereas the Descending path “celebrates the Earth, the body and the senses…. The Descending is “purely immanent and despises anything transcendental” (1996, p.10). The term “cosmic consciousness,” as it is used in gerotranscendence theory, seems more of a mixture of the two types of spirituality delineated by Wilber. It appears to me, based on my own research and counseling practice with elders, to be both transcendent and immanent in nature. In fact, I think that the spiritual experience of cosmic consciousness was best described by Mircea Eliade (2009) in his concept of Enstasy. Enstasy is a form of meditative absorption, a state experienced as subjectless envelopment or immersion. Eliade stressed that it should be contrasted with ecstasy, meaning “to put outside” as in states of transport and rapture. I have found this to be an important distinction when it comes to the spirituality of gerotranscendence.

To the extent that transpersonal psychology is concerned with higher states such as cosmic consciousness, with transcendence of ego self, and with the spiritual and unitive dimensions of human existence, then a transpersonal gerontology is not only possible but inevitable. Finally, I have to add that it is hard to even imagine a transpersonal gerontology without a strong contemplative foundation.

Selected References


The Author

Edmund Sherman, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus, University at Albany, State University of New York, where he was Professor of Social Welfare. Prior to his retirement he taught graduate courses in aging and human development as well as research and practice theory in social work. He also conducted research on aging in the Institute of Gerontology of the University at Albany. He received a bachelor’s degree in history and a master’s degree in social work from the University at Buffalo, and after extensive professional practice experience in child, family, psychiatric, and geriatric settings he obtained a Ph.D. in social work and social research from Bryn Mawr College. Professor Sherman has authored or co-authored twelve books and numerous articles on aging as well as social work practice and research. His most recent books include: Counseling the Aging; Working with Older Persons; Qualitative Research in Social Work; Meaning in Mid-Life Transitions; Reminiscence and the Self in Old Age, and Contemplative Aging: A Way of Being in Late Life. He is a Fellow of the Gerontological Society of America and a member of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences.
Baby Boomers on Conscious Aging

MYRTLE HEERY, Ph.D.
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With the largest population to ever age in this decade, the baby boomers are writing books on aging rich with experiences that lean into wisdom. We are beginning to hear their unique voices as they place their mark on aging consciousness.

Ram Dass, together with Matousek, and Roeder, in *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying* (2001), teaches through shared experience. His is a respected voice, to be sure, and especially for our generation. He, like the rest of us, can only know aging through experience.

Ram Dass, the pop guru-author of *Be Here Now*, a baby-boomer classic, suffered a stroke and was suddenly confronted with his own mortality, a reality that he, despite years of spiritual exploration and teaching, had managed to ignore, like many seekers of his generation. Faced with aphasia and
hemiplegia, he undertook a process of conscious learning, staying true to his old ideal of being here now. In this self-disclosing volume, he shares his painful process of coming to terms with his own decline, teaching more humbly than in the past, sharing the experience of others, and this time more through experience than intellectual assertion or borrowed religious wisdom.

Another baby boomer, Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda Bolen, redefines a Crone in a positive light. In her book *Crones Don’t Whine, Concentrated Wisdom for Juicy Wisdom* (2003), she beautifully describes aging for women through the elaboration of thirteen qualities; i.e., laughter, listening to your body, etc. This book offers wisdom primarily for women but concludes with an inclusion of men being crones and the power of crones together changing the world. Bolen, well known author and psychiatrist, shares poignantly from her found wisdom through her knowledge and experience.

Another noted name for baby boomers, Angeles Arrien, has written *The Second Half of Life: Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom* (2005). Arrien, a gifted anthropologist, approaches aging as a blessing, an invitation to embrace wisdom. She addresses aging through cross-cultural knowledge using symbol, myth, and stories. She elaborates eight gates of initiation such as coping with body changes, gate of intimacy, etc. Her map she forms for aging is helpful and very positive. She shares a positive approach to aging and introduces the reader to symbolic gates of wisdom. The book is moving and represents an approach to aging rich with wisdom.


Our book (Heery & Richardson), *Awakening to Aging: Glimpsing the Gifts of Aging* (2009), puts the often-dreaded topic of aging in a refreshing, sometimes humorous light without softening the realities. In fact, one of the book’s main themes is that the value and wisdom of aging is an unexplored and rewarding period of grace, laughter, and wisdom—side by side with its physical, economic, and mental challenges.

Baby Boomers, now approaching the final chapters of their lives, have enormous opportunity to live these years consciously, with joy as well as care, and without the fear and silence often characterizing American attitudes toward death.

Heery, whose husband survived metastatic melanoma 16 years ago, says: “My husband survived his cancer. He beat all the odds by living, but the question remains for us, did he? Neither my husband nor I are the same people we were before his cancer. Indeed there was a death and a rebirth for both of us” (p. 160).
Co-editor Dr. Gregg Richardson brought both his elderly parents from their home of 50 years near Cincinnati to live with him in Berkeley in their last decade of life. His story of caring for them through stroke, coma, confusion, dementia, and death, is a masterpiece of communication about the care, management, and love that he experienced. Richardson seamlessly educates the reader as he tells his family story, and like Heery, generously offers what was learned—as do all the eighteen chapter authors.

This book is rich with experience from baby boomers on aging including physical, legal, financial, housing, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of aging. Given we are only in the first decade of the baby boomers aging, we are off to a great start on consciously aging.

For me conscious aging cannot go without mentioning the Buddhist Monk, Palden Gyatso, who was in prison in China as a Tibetan monk for thirty two years. His book, *The Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk*, (1997) details his time in prison. I was honored to interview him and include the interview in our book *Awakening to Aging*. I would like to close with a quote from this interview with the hope that Transpersonal Psychology will focus on the wisdom of giving back in aging. Embodying aging is acting on the wisdom of many centuries - in giving we receive. This fact is the wisdom of aging. My question to Palden Gyatso and his answer speaks this wisdom: “Do you have anything else you would like to share about aging, death and dying?”

My final thought is just like I said before. I went to prison when I was 28 years old and when I came out I was 61 years old, all gray hair. Since I was 61, I was released from prison and came to Dharmsala, India. Now I am 75, and every day there is more and more gray hair. I think acceptance rather than feeling guilt is one of the best ways to look at aging, death and dying. There’s no way out of it. Even though the whole world might say the sun rises in the west, the sun will not rise in the west. It will always rise in the east. They are completely fooling themselves. I say accept death, and people who are wealthy can write their will to non-government or non-profit organizations that are helping humanitarian causes. That will be a worthy act.

The answer to my question came as Palden focused on the essentials of living: acceptance and compassion for others. Certainly one hears these tenets over and over in many religions and spiritual practices—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and in this case, Buddhism: first, acceptance is the best way to approach the experience of aging, death and dying; second, give some of your time and/or wealth to humanitarian causes as a form of selfless service.

References


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The Author

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Annotated Bibliography
The Role of Spirituality in Aging

SUSAN H. McFADDEN, Ph.D.
Oshkosh, Wisconsin

(NOTE: Some of these books are out of print but most can be found on Amazon.com or other websites that sell used and out of print books.)

Bianchi argues that middle aged people are challenged to turn inward to develop spiritually so that in elderhood, they might turn outward to bring their wisdom and strengths to the wider world.

Quotes from famous essayists, poets, playwrights, and novelists about feeling older and experiencing the joys and sorrows of aging.

This is Frankl’s well-known story of his concentration camp imprisonment during WWII and what it taught him about finding meaning in the midst of terrible suffering.

Guttmann, a well-known social gerontologist, applied Frankl’s ideas on logotherapy to the challenge of meaningful living in middle age and beyond.

Rabbi Dayle Friedman has worked with aging persons for many years, including serving as chaplain to persons with dementia living in long term care. See her new website: http://growingolder.co/


Authors in this book take psychological and theological perspectives on the meaning of spirituality throughout adulthood, particularly in later life. The authors know the literature well and are also involved in practice so they do not get lost in abstractions. The last chapter provocatively addresses “ageist theology.”


These two handbooks together contain over 70 chapters addressing a wide range of issues including pastoral care, congregational ministry, theological perspectives on aging, and late life spiritual growth and development.


This book asserts that all aging baby boomers will be living with dementia, whether they have the diagnosis or friends and family members have it. In order to flourish, communities need to find ways to support ongoing, meaningful relationships as people journey into forgetfulness.


This small book contains big ideas about late life meaning, based largely in the work of Carl Jung and Viktor Frankl.


One of Nouwen’s earliest publications, this book (illustrated with lovely photographs) meditates on aging as a way to the Darkness and as a way to the Light. In the second part of the book, the authors meditate on caring as a way to the Self and as a way to the Other.

RAMSEY, J. L., & BLIESZNER, R. (1999). Spiritual resiliency in older women: Models of strength for challenges through the life span. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. An in-depth study of groups of older Lutheran women in the US and Germany who were nominated by their pastors as showing spiritual resiliency, this book is grounded in Lutheran theology and through these women’s life stories, tells of the importance of faith communities to aging persons.


Interviews with older men and women in Germany and the US revealed their resiliency was developed through their interpersonal relationships, many of which were centered in their faith communities. Their relational spirituality enabled them to forgive others and to live with the tension of life’s gains and losses.

Written by a Methodist clergywoman, this excellent book offers abundant insights into pastoral care for persons with dementia.


This is the story of the famous Nun Study, in which Snowdon obtained the cooperation of elderly members of the School Sisters of Notre Dame to undergo repeated cognitive tests and to donate their brains for study of dementia. Snowdon tells this story with deep love and respect for these aged nuns.


Thibault, a social worker and experienced spiritual director, believes that people can obtain what she calls a “radical freedom” in later life and that spiritual practices open them to receive many spiritual gifts. She describes herself as part Methodist and part Catholic, but wholly inclined toward the Christian mystical tradition.

**The Author**

*Susan H. McFadden,* Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh where she teaches a variety of courses for undergraduate and graduate students. Since 2010, she has been teaching a capstone seminar that examines research on dementia from a biopsychosocial perspective, as well as contemporary work in the arts and humanities on topics like creativity, identity, and social relationships experienced by people living with dementia. Her most recent book (co-authored with her husband, John), *Aging Together: Dementia, Friendship, and Flourishing Communities,* was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in Spring, 2011.
Teaching and Leading with Readings in Transpersonal Gerontology

V. Quinton Wacks, Ed.D
Harrogate, Tennessee

The early sources that guided my teaching in late life spirituality included Jerome Ellison’s *Life’s Second Half: The Pleasures of Aging*, Eugene Bianchi’s *Aging as a Spiritual Journey*, and Gay Luce’s *Your Second Life*. Later I found much guidance in Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ron Miller’s *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, Rick Moody’s *The Five Stages of the Soul*, and Ram Dass’ *Still Here*. My favorite how to die spiritually books are Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick’s *The Art of Dying* and Kathleen Singh’s *The Grace in Dying*.

Although I would draw from all of these as a “transpersonal gerontologist,” the book I would have with me, whether for credit or non-credit classes,
eldering groups, or life in general and the later years in particular, would be From Age-ing to Sage-ing. I have in fact taught such classes from this book and find it to be the most comprehensive, authoritative and user friendly book out there for understanding and doing late life spirituality. I would sprinkle some Ram Dass gems from his book, Still Here, throughout as well. Three other books I have used in my spiritual eldering classes have been James Hollis’ Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life, Angeles Arrien’s The Second Half of Life: Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom, and Drew Leder’s Spiritual Passages: Embracing Life’s Sacred Journey. For research and data on the new field, I would cite Bob Atchley’s Spirituality and Aging and Lars Tornstam’s Gerotranscendence: A Developmental Theory of Positive Aging. For further information on the above books, please see “References” for “The Elder as Sage” article in this issue of the journal.