THE ELDER AS SAGE, OLD AGE AS SPIRITUAL PATH: TOWARDS A TRANSPERSONAL GERONTOLOGY

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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.

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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 ongoing 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-onement 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 tell 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.

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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.

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(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 transcendental 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 breaths 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).
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 in[to] 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 egoic 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.

REFERENCES


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
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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