



# Engaging Aging

## Becoming a Radiant Elder

By Sister Lynn M. Levo, CSJ, Ph.D.

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*“A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning to the species.*

*The afternoon of human life must have a significance of its own.”*

*Carl Jung*

The Covid-19 epidemic has impacted each person, and especially our elders. As a result of this pandemic, we are reminded that we are relational, emotional beings with our humanness rooted in connection and service. Vulnerability and anxiety touch everyone in diverse ways, requiring an increasing need for empathy and compassion. We are also learning how necessary and opportune it is to examine and challenge beliefs that guide our decision-making as well as the importance of honoring diverse voices for collaborative fruitful efforts.

In order to promote conscious, fruitful aging, and to help each other choose radiant elderhood in the days to come, these critical questions are important guides to our conversation: What story are we telling ourselves about human development and the later stages of living? What story is more realistic and supported by data? How does a new understanding of elder invite/challenge women and men religious to live more purposefully, passionately and with hope and joy?

### Human Development and Aging

We are re-conceptualizing human development today to include three stages: Childhood (birth to 20); Adulthood (Early adulthood 20-40 and Middle age (40-60); and Elderhood (3rd Age (60-80) (4th Age 80+). The later stages of life offer an opportunity to be less about doing while embracing being and contemplation. This is a rich time of life to share one’s wisdom

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and to continue to learn, have purpose and passion while living an intimate life with others. Because elders are critical for the well-being of a healthy society, the role of elder needs to be restored and valued. We have an opportunity to value older persons, to no longer participate in the dehumanization of elders by valuing productivity and earning above all else, and to challenge the negative views that older adults are useless and drain resources.

### Aging and Misconceptions

Encouraging a positive view of growing older is critical. Psychologist Manfred Diehl and colleagues suggest that challenging three common misconceptions will go a long way to invite a new, fact based understanding of growing older that engenders well-being and hope.

#### **Misconception 1: Aging is all about going downhill.**

Although aging is a risk factor for both health related and social losses, aging is not all loss and decline, especially for those in the Third Age. Primary mental abilities do not usually decline before 60, and for many, there is no marked decline before 80. In addition, emotional stability frequently manifests itself as does positive well-being throughout the Third Age.

**Misconception 2: Adults do not have control over aging.** Seven lifestyle related risk factors, most of which are under a person's control (physical activity, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, smoking, depression, cognitive inactivity, poor education and physical inactivity) account for more outcomes than genetics. For example, memory is impacted 30% by genetics and 70% by environment and lifestyle. Becoming physically active, eating a healthy diet, maintaining normal body weight, not smoking, and engaging in cognitively stimulating activities and regular physical activity (e.g., 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, 5 days a week) are necessary for

optimizing healthy physical (cardio, respiratory and musculoskeletal health) and cognitive aging. Of these, Dr. Diehl and colleagues have found physical activity to be the most promising non-pharmacological, non-invasive and most cost effective method of health promotion.

**Misconception 3: Age related losses are permanent.** Decline may be slowed or reversed in several aspects of aging. Engaging in cognitively stimulating activities, especially those that are novel and complex, can impact mental capacities. Osteoporosis can be managed and age related disabilities (e.g., the ability to care daily for oneself) need not be permanent. Positive aging can be achieved by personal choices and actions.

### **Conscious Eldering: Choosing Radiance, Not Old Age**

Throughout life, it is vital that each person's life be grounded in a deep belief in the possibility of having a happy and meaningful life throughout the life span. As fully functioning human beings, what will it take to live purposefully and passionately in the present? Ron Pevny, director of the Center for Conscious Eldering, suggests that embracing four significant choices (honoring our past, cultivating purpose, developing passion and a healthy relational life with others) can help to ensure a radiant, life-giving elderhood.

#### **Honoring one's past**

It is important to do a life review, focusing on who we have been and what we have done, and being willing to let go of identifying with the past. "I was a teacher, a nurse, a provincial and those roles are in my past." Wisdom does not come from having experiences. Wisdom comes from reflecting on one's life experiences. This requires individual inner work and some form of encouragement that recognizes and supports letting go. Communities that offer transition

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rituals assist with letting go, offering an opportunity to embrace a present identity. To fully embrace who one is today and what brings us alive now, letting go of what was is required.

Much of the inner work of eldering focuses on healing and letting go of old events, circumstances, situations and interpersonal challenges that may continue to capture our energy today. Pevny states, "One cannot shine as a radiant elder if one's energy is sapped by old messages, grudges, angers, hurts and feelings of victimhood. We cannot move lightly and serenely if we have not forgiven others and ourselves for the slights and hurts we have experienced or caused." If we have not sufficiently grieved past losses, the weight of grief will continue to sap our energy.

The inner work of eldering is a deeply spiritual task and includes righting our relationship with self, others and God. This work is aided by accompaniment and practices that nurture connection with a loving God and with others which help us experience ourselves in a wider context. This work, although personal, is best done with the help of others.

### Having a guiding purpose

Happiness and inner peace depend on having a **purpose** that guides us through each day so that every day is an opportunity to live a commitment to grow personally and to serve others. Purpose, something we cultivate through deliberate reflection and action, will naturally evolve as we evolve. Covid-19 is teaching us that individuals need a reason to get up in the morning that is larger than themselves. They need a way to express their unique self and their gifts both **for their own satisfaction and to help make the world a better place**. With aging, work and relationships, two common sources of purpose, often diminish and this can feel like one's

identity is slipping away. Where then does one turn for purpose?

Inward directed efforts to become better human beings, learn new skills and/or face long-held emotional struggles (e.g., anger or a sense of not being enough) are areas for many. Poet David Whyte suggests that at our present crossroads, we might not arrive at something better, unless we become much better ourselves. Happiness is connected to comfort with self and confidence in one's priorities, including spending time on what one values and with people whom you value. Outward directed activities that serve the greater good and contribute to a better world also continue to be important, purposeful avenues in elder years. Elderhood invites a shift in perspective, an opportunity to awake each day with a commitment to be about what matters most today. Life coach Amina Altai notes that purpose is found at the intersection of gifts, values and what brings joy and enables you to make a difference. Nothing hastens old age more than idleness and or numbness.

Sister Martha Marie McCaffrey, CSJ, (below) was one of the many sisters at the CSJ Provincial House in Latham, NY, who volunteered to make protective masks for sisters and staff during the pandemic. Sister was in charge of all the sewing machines. (Photo used with permission)



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Paths to purpose may be simple or complex. Personal goals may include maintaining independence, coping well with change, and self-acceptance. Purpose can also be found in expressing compassion for others, looking for joy and pleasure in small things, working to stay strong and healthy, and expressing self through art or writing. Ron Pevny adds that as one's health diminishes and losses mount, choosing to bear one's suffering with grace, courage and dignity can also be purposeful, and often a gift to others.

Purpose also grows from our connection to others, which is why the isolation imposed by Covid-19 may have caused a crisis of purpose for some. It is imperative to realize how isolation has multiple impacts on elderhood including the physical, cognitive and emotional realms as well as having a possible negative impact on one's sense of purpose. There are many ways to overcome isolation and discover passion. Reading, which connects us to people we will never know, being inspired by how others make the world better, and practicing gratitude which strengthens relationships, often are important sources of purpose.

### Faith and Purpose

Faith is an integral part of adult life for many, especially for women and men religious. Embracing Jesus and his message of loving self and others (Mt. 22:37-38) is an invitation to purpose from a generous, personal God. This invitation begins with God's gracious love and the call to love self, a call to see self and then each person as special with a unique place, role and purpose throughout life. With our losses mounting, especially our physical abilities and loss of loved ones, the continuing ability to love self and see oneself as worthy may be challenging in later years. The gospel reminds us of each person's worth and purpose. Rooted in this

awareness, all are challenged to look around, recognize the worth and uniqueness of self and each person and how each person unfolds through the multiple ways of loving and caring for others (Mt. 25:34-40).

There is purpose to be found in faith, a purpose centered in love of God, self and others. Loving and loving well is challenging and a daily choice, only accomplished with the help of others. Paul recognizes this reality when he exhorts: "So encourage each other and build each other up" (1 Thes.5:11). Our ability to trust in God's wisdom, that we have a purpose, depends greatly on the strength of our connection, on our personal prayer life with a gracious, benevolent God.

Finally, discovering an evolving sense of purpose will be aided by **flexibility** and **being present** and **open** to new experiences each day. Radiant elders **adapt** to their changing bodies and to the situations that surround them. Cultivating and engaging **imagination** is also a way to live more fully in the later stages of life. Knowledge is often limited, while imagination opens to possibilities. Lastly, we cannot underestimate the impact of the quality of our relational life. It is difficult to feel purposeful and passionate when surrounded by those who are not interested in others or in making positive contributions to the world in which they live.

### Cultivating the life enhancing energy of passion

We enrich life by finding and developing passion, being alive to what is. Passion tends to be developed, not discovered. It is something fulfilling, energizing, enjoyable and at times not easy to pursue. Identifying one's passion requires time and space, an appropriate task for elders who may be better able to avoid or negotiate distractions. Psychologist Angela Duckworth maintains that cultivating passion takes



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grit, patience and persistence.

Life coach Amina Altai advises her clients that embracing passion requires eliminating what saps energy and tends to numb, e.g., some people, habits, addictions, and time-fillers, and replacing them with people, activities, images and practices that enhance aliveness. Time fillers (e.g., television game shows, computer games) that seem harmless, may indeed encourage numbness. We cannot be numb and be happy. Exploring what you truly love, what makes you smile, what finds its way into your conversations without even trying, or addressing those injustices about the world that concern you, are additional ways to explore passion. And, let us not forget to make it fun! Passion finds its natural expression in happiness, purpose, meaning, hope and joy, in being a radiant elder.

### **Fostering and relying on a community: a relational life**

In order to thrive at any age, to grow, share, teach, learn and serve, relationships are critical.

At every age, especially in elder years, everyone needs a place where they can authentically share self and see self. It is not about having a lot of people around. Rather, it is having persons with whom one can authentically share. We cannot know ourselves through introspection alone. It is in and through intimate relationships that we learn who we are and what meaningful roles we can play with and for others. Intimacy, the ability to reveal what is innermost, becomes even more important and necessary in later years for a person's own journey and for an elder's ability to offer wisdom, understanding and perhaps comfort to others along the way. New research highlights the importance of relationships that span generations because they provide for the possibility of generativity, an opportunity to invest in, care for and develop the next generation. Thought leader and founder of *encore.org*, Marc Freedman notes an accumulating body of research on purpose, generativity, relationships and face to face contact suggesting that engagement with others that flows across generations



This sketch of Sr. Lynn's hands was drawn for her jubilee by artist Sr. Marion C. Honors, CSJ. (Used with permission)

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is likely to make for healthier, happier and longer-lived, fruitful individuals. How can we create opportunities for our elder brothers and sisters to invest in the future of our youth and young adults? How does this information invite conversation about future living arrangements?

### Elders Being Hope-filled and Hope Providers

Hope is a theological virtue calling us to be fully human. It responds to our God-given desire to be happy, preserving us from selfishness by the call to care for self and others. Hope is basically our human desire for something good to happen. When we hope for something, it expresses a hunger within us for more life. And when we acknowledge what we hope for, we become aware of our dissatisfaction with who we are now and a desire for a future in which more life will enter our hearts. Because we no longer want to settle for our current reality, hope encourages us to work for change as the future we

Sister Anne Stephen Wysocki, CSJ, (below) enjoying an ice cream float at the Provincial House while observing Covid-19 safe practice of masking. (Photo used with permission)



desire will not come by magic! Hope, therefore, is both reality-based and active.

Psychology has a keen interest in hope and what it takes for us, human as we are, to be hopeful. First, hope is centered in a feeling of empowerment, having the **ability to make choices** that impact our life and the lives of others. Empowering elders to continue to make life-giving choices is central for hopefulness. Because hope is not possible when we are isolated, healthy relating with others is imperative. Encouraging friendship and mutuality, critical at every stage of life, becomes no less important in later life. When we believe in the continued presence of a loved one, a mentor, a friend, a caring community, and an ally who fosters a **sense of connection, trust and openness**, then hope is possible. Knowing how to cope with stress and anxiety as well as how to care for self, especially how to calm and soothe in healthy ways, are fundamental to **being resilient**. Encouraging a **balanced life**, embracing the multiple aspects of self-care (physical, emotional, relational and spiritual) prepares us for what is to come. Finally, hopefulness is rooted in being **spiritual**, in a connection to something greater, and trusting in a loving, faithful God. With Covid-19 and the quarantining and isolation required for safety, we are learning much about the importance of personal prayer and communal rituals that help us keep conversing with God and others.

We will thrive in hope if we help others to be hopeful. What better way to be generative, to give life to others in today's world, than for our elders to be providers of hope. Elders can mentor hope in others by offering **availability**, making time, sharing space, remaining flexible and sensitive to emotional cues and needs of others. When **present, open and focused**, they invite

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the possibility of hope in others. Finally, hope happens over time. As elders provide the appropriate sentiment when most needed, with **repeated involvement**, hope thrives.

Fruitful eldering ultimately requires us to challenge our beliefs about aging, and to make health enhancing choices while continuing to acknowledge each person's beauty, gifts, significance, value and ability to make a difference. Living connected with others and with purpose and passion will enhance the ability of our elders to live more fully and freely and to make a difference, to be a light to others, to be radiant.

### Questions for Reflection

- How does this current re-conceptualization of adult development open you to possibility?
- What are you doing to challenge the misconceptions about aging in your lives and in the lives of others?
- Are you committed to making healthy lifestyle choices in every age?
- How can you help one another to take an inventory of your beliefs about what may be limiting your living fully and lovingly at every age?
- What if you offered transition rituals when you move from being in ministry and/or to an assisted living residence?
- How do you assist each other to live passionately and purposefully in the present?
- How might you "think outside the box" and offer opportunities for intergenerational living?
- How might you go about promoting radiant elderhood as opposed to old age?

## Resources

### BOOKS

Aronson, Louise. *Elderhood*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

Levitin, Daniel J. *Successful Aging*. New York: Dutton, 2020.

Pevny, Ron. *Conscious Living, Conscious Aging*. New York: Atria. 2014

Scioli, Anthony. *The Power of Hope*. Deerfield, Florida: Health Communications, 2010

### ARTICLES

Diehl, Manfred, Smyer, Michael and Mehrotra, Chandra. Optimizing Aging: A Call For A New Narrative. *American Psychologist*. 2020, Vol. 73, No. 4, PP572-582.

Whyte, David. LCWR Interview. *Occasional Papers*, Summer, 2020.

### ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

Pevny, Ronald. [Envisioning Your Ideal Elderhood and The Inner World of Conscious Eldering](#).

Morin, Amy. [Seven Tips for Finding Your Purpose in Life](#).

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healing to our world.*

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