

CONSCIOUS AGING By Mariamne Paulus

At the end of May, 2005, we completed a Teleos Institute class series entitled “Conscious Aging.” We used [Faces of Aging*](#) as our study and reference book as we examined our own attitudes, images, fears, convictions, values, and actions around the subject of aging. Perhaps you would like to share the fruits of our labor in the form of some of the insights we found valuable.

How Do You Define Old?

We began our exploration with a definition from each participant of when a person becomes old. Most of us agreed that there are at least two aspects to growing old. One is the mental/emotional component: namely, how old do I feel?

The other is the physical: how healthy and strong is the body?

We all agreed that we have known people younger than sixty who were “old” in their attitudes toward life. They have grown rigid in their preferences and opinions, they are not open to new experiences, they are stuck in their habitual patterns, and they have no appetite for life. We also agreed that if we remain youthful in our attitudes and outlooks and enjoy life, the age of the body does not define us so completely.

As for the age of the body, Beverly Archibald, one of the class members, offered what I thought was a most helpful perspective. She said she likes to think of the 70’s as early old age, the 80’s as middle old age, and the 90’s as old old age. Since I read in the newspaper every day about people who are in their 60’s who are called “elderly,” I appreciated having a more graduated way of defining the aging process. Both OSO and I found it sobering to think that we are within three (me) or four (OSO) years from “early old age,” but fortunately we still feel about 35 or 40.

We all agreed that there are some characteristics of the aging of the body that are almost universal. A slower pace of moving and thinking, and eventually of speaking. A falling away of ambition, desire for power and success, a need for approval, and the urge to prove ourselves in any way or to any one. And a diminishing of the acuteness of some of the sensory portals, like hearing and eyesight.

The Inner Elder

One of the main contributions of the book we used was to suggest that we develop the “inner elder” as we age. We spent a lot of time exploring things like our undeveloped potential, what we want to do with our time and energy as we age, what is most important to us at this stage of our lives, and how we want to be remembered by others.

Some of us have already had substantial experience with being considered an “elder” by others, namely someone to look to for wisdom and experience. Others had not yet thought of themselves as elders. All of us were aware that we felt we had much yet to contribute to the world around us, talents to share and develop, experience that has given us depth of understanding, and interests that we want to pursue.

We felt there was value in reflecting on what we can contribute as elders. Mary Ann McCarthy shared with us these guidelines she has adopted for herself:

- Be useful
- Be resilient
- Be present to the now
- Be open to new ideas
- Be fluid
- Keep it simple
- Be clear of mind
- Be approachable

They seem important to the development and expression of the inner elder.

Other qualities we felt would help us to function as elders are a youthful outlook that welcomes new experiences, delights in life as it presents itself, is eager to learn and discover the new, and stays current with the changing culture. Keeping up with the rapid changes in electronic gadgetry by learning to use DVD players, cellular phones, computers and attendant technologies will keep us in the flow. Movies and television can be avenues for exposure to the youth culture if we don’t have children and grandchildren.

These words from our study book speak to these issues:

At 92 years, Rebecca Latimer says: “The way I see it, the first rule is to be open to new ideas, to be non-

judgmental. Don't ask the younger generation to follow the rules you learned so many years ago. Any change is hard to accept as you grow older . . .

"It is much easier to cling to your past values, to judge everybody and everything by the standards you have always trusted, but if you do, you will be left on the sidelines. The future will pass you by, and you will be sitting in your rocking chair, grumbling and complaining with all the other old codgers." (From her book *You're Not Old Until You're Ninety*.)

Body Images

We talked about our feelings about our bodies and their aging process. It seemed important not to become too identified with changes occurring in the body, but rather to view them as part of the natural order process that makes it possible for us to have new experiences in and through the body.

We examined our attitudes toward the body, noticing that it is easy to fall into feelings that the body is betraying us, or working against us, or failing us, rather than continuing to love and honor the body as the vehicle through which we have our life experiences. We talked about holding positive images of our bodies instead of letting our culture's total focus on youth condition us to lose touch with the beauty of the aging body. The book *Faces of Aging* helped us with this process by presenting many untouched photos of aging faces and offering poems about their beauty.

We talked about new expressions for our sensuality and sexuality in our later years, emphasizing the importance of touching and being touched, holding and being held, experiencing pleasure through our bodies, expressing love and being loved.

We explored our attitudes toward illness and our habitual ways of dealing with ill health, recognizing that the body needs more and more attention and care as it ages. We talked about humor as one way to keep the energy light around physical challenges, without ignoring or diminishing what we are dealing with. Kindness toward self, and compassion for the body and what it goes through, seem attitudes that are essential to cultivate.

Adapting to the Aging Process

We talked about getting all our papers in order – wills, living wills, living trusts, powers of attorney for health care and general powers of attorney – and of updating those papers on a regular basis as we move through these aging years.

We talked about making decisions and plans before we actually get there for where to live in our middle and old old age so that we can prepare for that transition.

We all recognized the importance of beginning now to simplify our lives by giving material things away that we no longer use, either offering them as gifts to family and friends who might like to enjoy them or by donating them to charitable organizations.

We examined to see if there are activities, relationships, attitudes or values that we need to let go of. We also looked to see if there were things that have already fallen away without our conscious choice-making. We talked about gracefully providing more and more people with opportunities to give to us as we have less strength and energy for doing strenuous activities.

Deepening The Spiritual Life

We acknowledged that the diminishment of physical energies can be an invitation to go within and develop more fully our spiritual life through study, meditation and prayer as well as through our service through community organizations.

Most of us felt the need to develop our awareness of and appreciation for energetic ways of participating in community life, recognizing that we may not always be able to be as active in the outer life as we have been. The awareness that prayer makes a difference, for example, can forestall the feeling that we are withdrawing from life or that we are useless if we can't physically participate or help.

The Love Principles will continue to serve us as important guidelines for staying alive and keeping unconditional love flowing through our fields. We will need to concentrate on applying them to ourselves as well as to others.

**Faces of Aging*, by Nader Robert Shabahangi, Ph.D., is published by the Elders Academy Press in Warsaw, Poland. To order copies go to www.pacificinstitute.org, write Leslie Lewis at Leslie@pacificinstitute.org, or call Leslie at 415-861-3455.

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