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# Conscious Aging: Nurturing a New Vision of Longevity

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by Robert C. Atchley

As more and more middle-aged and older people become interested in making an inner journey of spiritual discovery and engaging in spiritually rooted service, interest in "conscious aging" has grown. In the early 1990s, a new movement articulated a vision for conscious aging. In our mass society, though, popular movements have to take the market into account if they want to spread. Those of us involved in this new movement have had to ask whether it is possible to retain the power of the original vision of conscious aging and still meet the demands of the marketplace

In 1992, the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies hosted a two-day conference in Manhattan titled "Conscious Aging." It was the first major effort to bring together a wide range of people to explore conscious aging: growing old with awareness or being spiritually awake as we age, not simply being aware of our advancing years. The conference attracted over 1,500 participants from all parts of the United States to hear some of the leading figures from the consciousness movement and from the field of aging lay out their visions.

Ram Dass and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi from the consciousness movement and Maggie Kuhn from the field of aging were among the keynote speakers. Each of these keynoters--all elders--were able to articulate a broad vision in which aging brings opportunities for spiritual deepening and for new kinds of engagement with younger generations.

## The Inner Journey

During that first conference, Ram Dass stressed the importance of an intentional inner journey as an effective foundation for dealing with the challenges of aging as well as for continuing opportunities for social engagement, even if mainly with caregivers. This perspective, leavened by his having survived a major stroke in 1998, infuses his book, *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying*. Schachter-Shalomi articulated his vision of conscious aging as a process that could lay the foundation for a new role for the elder in our society. In his vision, spiritual elders are people who prepare, through specific work and years of life experience, to mentor and nurture upcoming generations and to bring healing to organizations, communities, countries and the planet. This vision led Schachter-Shalomi to found the Spiritual Eldering Institute, now based in Boulder, Colo., which facilitates the preparation of spiritual elders, and to write *From Age-ing to Sage-ing, A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*. I attended the 1992 conference, where I was privileged to meet both of these sagacious people, among others.



By 1994, I was serving on the Spiritual Eldering Institute's advisory committee and on an Omega task force to plan further development of conscious aging programming, and was presenting with Ram Dass and others at a conscious aging conference in Clearwater, Fla. In early 1994, Omega offered another conscious aging conference in Stamford, Conn. Again, Ram Dass and Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi were featured as speakers and "conference weavers." However, in an attempt to attract higher numbers of participants, Omega, which is headquartered in Rhinebeck, N.Y., invited speakers with high name recognition but spotty experience with either the consciousness movement or issues of aging.

For example, one featured speaker had done important research on the conditions under which people die and had written a best-selling book about it, but he had no background that would allow him to tie his research the issue of dying with spiritual awareness. Thus, the emphasis on using well-known authors to attract larger numbers of people led to choices that I felt began to erode the quality of the enterprise by diluting the message of conscious aging.

A third conscious aging conference was held in the fall of 1994 in Atlanta. There, the featured speakers list was dominated by figures who had written well-known books or held high office, but unfortunately they tended not to know much about conscious aging. This fact was apparently obvious to prospective participants, and the turnout was much smaller than expected. Omega did a fourth conscious aging event in 1995, a smaller conference for about 200 participants that was presented exclusively by Ram Dass and Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi. This very successful conference was filmed by a Canadian Broadcasting Corp. crew and is available on video. This conference also marked the end of Omega's large conscious aging conferences. Omega staff indicated that they felt unable to meet the challenge of remaining true to their vision while attracting substantial audiences.

Can programs that see later life in terms of inner spiritual growth and an enlightened contribution to the community survive in our materialistic culture? Maybe yes and maybe no. On the one hand, those of us who gave birth to the conscious aging movement are still involved and moving forward. Figures such as Ram Dass, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Connie Goldman, Drew Leder, Harry R. Moody and Wendy Lustbader are busy lecturing and writing to bring their perspective to a wider audience. But if we seek a wider audience, we experience commercial pressures from promoters and publishers to make our efforts fit within their models of what spirituality or self-help programs and books ought to look like. We have to fit into their categories. Even Ram Dass, who has a large following, reported privately that his publisher pushed for him to tone down the spiritual aspects of *Still Here* and simplify his presentation.

Best-selling titles such as Deepak Chopra's books *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* and *Grow Younger, Live Longer: 10 Steps to Reverse Aging*, coauthored with David Simon may offer valuable tips and ideas to their readers, but their inherent promise of rejuvenation also implies a denial of aging. Many of the top-selling 50 books on amazon.com's category of spirituality and aging claim to offer methods of "reversing aging" or allowing us to live "agelessly." They bring to mind the old joke, "Aging is about mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter." Ultimately, though, the enterprise of conscious aging is about developing and maintaining integrity. This journey involves enlightening the mind, not tricking it into thinking there are shortcuts to becoming enlightened. It involves developing spiritual resources to adapt to aging, not to deny it.

The vision laid out by the early framers of the "aging with consciousness" movement involves developing and nurturing a contemplative life and engaging in service rooted in the higher levels of

consciousness that a contemplative life makes available. Aging with consciousness is neither quick nor easy. It requires that we come back over and over again to our intention to be awake as we age. It requires that we practice compassionate listening and look at the world from a long-term vantage point that transcends our purely personal desires and fears. With years of such practice, we may begin to see what will actually help. This message may not be easy to sell in a culture fixated on quick solutions. ■



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