

Aiming High

The art, the practice, and the gift of conscious aging

by Ron Pevny

The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it. Michelangelo

What do you aim for as you age? What does aging mean to me? How do I deal with my fears of aging? How can I find fulfillment and dignity as I age? What is the purpose of my life after retirement? Such questions of meaning and purpose arise in the quiet hours for many of us but are seldom asked, answered or even acknowledged in public. Modern culture usually considers only the monetary aspects of aging. While addressing our financial and physical security is certainly important, it is equally important to address the needs of our emotional and spiritual selves –our needs to thrive as well as survive.

Conscious aging entails a commitment to address such questions. It is a vision of aging that recognizes there is something very life-enhancing and passion-awakening to aim for as we contemplate the later chapters of our lives; that these years can be a time of deep fulfillment as we reach the pinnacle of our personal and spiritual growth; that these years can be an opportunity for the kind of service to community and sharing of wisdom that, throughout most of human history defined the honored role that cultures accorded their elders. For those inspired by this vision, conscious aging is a path characterized by meaningful goals for our elderhood that spring from our authentic selves (rather than the images of the society around us), and by our use of the power of intention and inner work to make our sense of what is possible a reality. It is a challenging path that requires the courage to aim high, bringing awareness and intention to our aging, rather than merely drifting into old age with few if any goals that can bring out the best in us.

This is not just about aiming for lofty goals, however. Our ability to reach our outer goals is very much dependent upon the state of our inner life and the inner development work we do to bring clear, healthy energy to our lives as we age. We have all heard the old adage, “wherever you go, there you are.” There is great value in seriously reflecting on the question, “what kind of a self am I bringing to my later life chapters?”

As we move through our lives, all of us suffer the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” We are all wounded by others, by painful experiences, by our own misguided choices and actions. These woundings often produce lingering, heart-closing resentments and numb our emotional lives. Many of us harbor regrets and are weakened by disempowering internal stories of ourselves being victims, or inadequate, or unworthy. We have all absorbed and internalized countless messages from the society around us about who we are and what should have meaning for us, and in the process become to a greater or lesser degree estranged from our own authentic selves and our internal guidance for our lives.

All of these realities, largely unconscious for most of us, bind our life energy to emotional baggage, sap our passion, and blind us to our unique potential. The lack of energy, passion and sense of purpose that so many experience in their senior years is not primarily a function of age, but rather of these life-draining inner dynamics. Critical to conscious aging is commitment to inner work to free up our energy and passion by healing old wounds, forgiving resentments, transforming regrets, re-writing disempowering old stories, replacing counterproductive habits with conscious choices, and getting in touch with the spiritual dimension in ourselves from which the visions and goals that are authentically ours –that enable us to aim high—can emerge.

Conscious aging is not a path that everyone will resonate with or embrace. Aging is difficult and most of us are doing are best to age well in a confusing and not very conscious cultural milieu. A great many of us are not able to hear the inner call to conscious aging amid the many other cultural voices and do the best we can with the awareness we have. Others feel a discontent with the dominant paradigm for aging but have no awareness of what this discontent means or what alternatives exist. Many feel attracted to this empowering vision for elderhood but do not feel up to the concerted, ongoing effort that this challenging path asks of us. For many, this is just not their cup of tea.

However, a growing number of baby boomers and well as those beyond their sixties are indeed hearing a strong call from within the depths of themselves to age consciously. Are you one of them? What do you plan to do with the remaining chapters of your precious life? If you recognize that call within yourself, I encourage you to respond as if your deepest fulfillment depends upon it and as if the wellbeing of the generations to follow you depends upon the choices you and others make. Because they do.

Begin that journey now, for you don't know how much time you will have to fulfill your potential. Begin now, because while your gifts and efforts may seem insignificant, collectively they will make a critical difference in helping meet the huge challenges facing today's wounded world. Collectively we can lay the foundation for a healthy world in which our descendents can thrive. There is no greater legacy we can leave to future generations, and no greater gift we can give to ourselves, than to aim high as we age, ever reaching for our best. The world **needs** the wisdom, wholeness, passion and gifts of conscious elders.

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