

The Positive Aging Newsletter  
<http://www.healthandage.com>  
September - October, 2007

The Positive Aging Newsletter by Kenneth and Mary Gergen Dedicated to productive dialogue between research and practice Sponsored by the Web-based Health Education Foundation and the Taos Institute  
Issue No 46

In this issue

- Personal Appearances
- Commentary: If Only I Were Younger...
- Research:
  - The Political Power of Elders
  - Loneliness and Health
- In the News:
  - No Place Like Home
  - Gaining Wisdom From Adversity
  - Women's Hockey at 60!
  - Strange Encounters Can Enhance Moods
- Book Reviews
  - Women Over 50: Psychological Perspectives
  - Wellness Made Easy
- Readers Respond
- Announcements and Upcoming Events
- Information for Readers

\*\*\* Personal Appearances \*\*\*

\* On Tuesday, Nov. 13, the two of us will be contributing to the program: You are What You Create - A Boomervision Event, at WHY? Technology Center, 150 N. 6th St., Philadelphia. For details: <http://www.comingofage.org/register>

\* On December 6-8, 2007, on the campus of Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, FL, we will be making two presentations at the "The 2007 National Positive Aging Conference: Beyond the Cutting Edge" This conference includes discussions on the latest thinking in civic engagement, brain fitness, purposeful living, lifelong learning, creativity in later life, living in community, intergenerational programming, and life planning for the

third age. Sponsors include AARP, American Society on Aging, Civic Ventures, Elderhostel, Generations United, National Center for Creative Aging, National Council on Aging, and Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes For details: <http://www.eckerd.edu/positiveaging>

\*\*\* Commentary Aging and Physical Attraction \*\*\*

As our commentary for this issue of the Newsletter, we are including an exchange based on an e-mail conversation between one of our readers and Mary Gergen, both concerned with the sensitive issue of aging and attractiveness.

READER: I am wondering if you have ever dealt with any fears around aging, particularly in terms of feeling a loss of attractiveness. If so, how did you deal with it? I have had an intense fear of aging since I was in my twenties (am now 58), and it seems to revolve around my fear of being old and unattractive. Though I do have a rich spiritual life which includes a regular meditation practice, the fear remains and is in fact growing. And of course, sabotages my peace of mind.

MARY: I think we all become conscious as we age that we are becoming more and more invisible in terms of being physically attractive creatures. For some women it seems to be a blessing; for some, it was never important in the first place; but for many, it is experienced as you say, with fear and regret. The media and the social sciences collaborate in creating this negative situation. But there it is. I even wrote a journal article about 20 years ago called "Finished at 40" about the lack of interest in women as they matured. However, today, I think I would call it "Finished at 50" because 50 is the new 40. There has been a shift in what we think Old means. Still...

A few women I've known have remained quite alive in a sensual way into their late 70's. One of my friends, Adele, was a wonderful flirt at 99. In my view it seems primarily a matter of style, a way of being in the world, as to whether or not you are seen as attractive. I recall that Ken was absolutely intrigued at a dinner party one evening as he sat next to an artist well into her 80s. I think there is a great range in the ways of getting older, and there are models of aging that appeal to some more than others...I like the "Auntie Mame" idea...being rather unorthodox and free. Wearing what I want.. doing what I want. Letting my beauty be in my ways of being...and hoping people enjoy my presence, and appreciate my style.

To myself, I am still a beautiful woman... and so at times it is rather surprising to look into the mirror and see the older woman I have become. I suppose I might go to a plastic surgeon if I felt very strongly about it. Two of my best friends from college did so when they were 60. But I still feel that it

is ultimately style over substance (in this case bodily) that counts. I know physically beautiful women who have no problem in attracting lovers, but they are so self-centered and critical that no one cares to share a life with them. (A former professor of mine once told me he had married just such a woman. Later I met his second wife, an average looking woman who was charming, funny, and kind.)

There are two small thoughts I have found useful over the years. First, when I look back at early photos and begin to feel forlorn about my present state, I say to myself: If I look back in 10 years at the photos taken of me today, I will feel, "Oh, how attractive she was." A second thought remains with me daily: people always seem to worry about the wrong things. It is life's surprises that usually bring the demons. So, perhaps we should not spend too much time on useless worries. Its better to count our blessings.

### \*\*\* Research: The Political Power of Elders \*\*\*

In terms of voting power, the elderly are a major political force. When it comes to a presidential election in the U.S., for example, the proportion of the population over 65 who vote exceeds those under 45 by some 20%. Older people also tend to be more knowledgeable about politics than younger people. In various surveys the elders also report the highest level of interest in political campaigns and public affairs. They also make campaign contributions at higher rates. In the 2000 presidential campaign, for example, 14% of people age 65 and older contributed to a campaign. Among those age 35-64, 10% contributed, and among those 18-35, less than 3% gave money to a political campaign. In 2000 12% of all campaign workers were older people. A Congressman once called the senior citizens' political agenda, the 'third rail in politics' (referring to the train lines in which one would be electrocuted from touching the third rail).

So powerful is this population in its political potential that many worry they will favor only their special interests, possibly at the expense of those who are younger. There is little indication this is so. For the most part, the elderly do not vote as a bloc. As exit polls indicate, their votes are distributed among candidates in roughly the same proportion as those who are younger. The votes of the elderly are more likely to depend on their economic and social status, labor force participation, gender, ethnicity, and religion. Unless they are directly threatened, their voting patterns will continue to be split by other interests. Yet, the political power of the elders is like a lion: politicians are wise to feed it properly and avoid irritation at their peril.

From: Older People and Political Engagement: From Avid Voters to 'Cooled-out Marks' by Robert H. Binstock. Generations. Winter 2006-2007, pg. 24-30.

\*\*\* Research: Loneliness and Health \*\*\*

There is substantial research indicating that people who live alone are likely to have poorer health than those who live with someone. We have indeed discussed some of this research in previous issues of the Newsletter. However, the reasons for the relationship between social relationships and health are ambiguous. Important light on this subject is provided by John Cacioppo, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago. He has been studying the health effects of loneliness for years, and has been particularly interested in the possibility for a biological link between loneliness and health. His research had shown that people who are lonely, who have no one they feel close to, are likely to become ill and die at a younger age than people who feel close to others.

In the present case, Cacioppo's team studied 14 volunteers -- six who scored in the top 15 percent of a loneliness scale, and eight who were the least lonely of the group. The researchers studied the gene activity related to the participants' immune system cells -- the white blood cells that protect us from viruses and bacteria. When all of the human genes were compared, the activity of a group of 200 seemed to differentiate the lonely individuals from the others. These genes are especially involved in helping the body fight off disease. The findings suggest that the loneliest people had unhealthy levels of chronic inflammation, which has been associated with heart and artery disease, arthritis, Alzheimer's and other ills.

While the research biologists' advice was to give lonely people aspirin, (!) our advice is to encourage everyone, especially people who don't feel close to others, to find ways of making a few good friends and encouraging closer family ties. If physical limitations restrict access to others, connections on the internet could even be a resource. Our reasoning is the reverse of the biologists. While genetic material may influence our social lives, our social lives can also influence our biology. We can't do much about our genes, but we can do something about our interpersonal relations.

The report is available freely online in the journal Genome Biology at <http://genomebiology.com/>.

\*\*\* In the News: No Place Like Home \*\*\*

The media often feature retirees who move to sunny climes and to new styles of life. However, we should be careful not to generalize from these depictions. For the vast majority of aging people, staying in one's current home, or if not, in a nearby location, is the most likely and desired choice. According to the U. S.

Census Bureau, 9 out of 10 Americans over 60 stayed in the same home or in the same county between 1995 and 2000. A recent survey of Americans over 50 found that almost 90% wanted to stay in their current home as long as possible.

Having an older population in a community is not a curse, but a blessing according to Stephen Golant, a University of Florida gerontologist. Up until age 75 or so, older residents are strong economic contributors to communities; they support cultural events, restaurants, housing, health and medical services, and they often continue to work and to volunteer. They are ideal citizens in many ways (and they don't require new schools to be built!). As they age, their contributions may decline, depending on the nature of community resources and their own financial condition. Planning ahead for the future of an aging population is a worthy cause for entire communities to address. Many stresses can be avoided if the right resources are made available. In Swarthmore, PA, for example, volunteers drive older residents to medical appointments; nearby grocery stores deliver to homes; and community center activities are geared to daytime events for older citizens.

"The New Gray Areas" by Anna Bernasek. Key, The New York Times, Fall, 2007, pg. 32

\*\*\* In the News: Gaining Wisdom From Adversity \*\*\*

These are some words of wisdom that Glenn Mangurian created in response to an injury that left him paralyzed, without the use of his legs.

1. You can't know what will happen tomorrow, and its better that way.
2. You can't control what happens, just how you respond.
3. Loss amplifies the value of what remains.
4. It's easier to create new dreams than to cling to broken ones.
5. Your happiness is more important than righting injustices.

As Mangurian concluded: "Many of us underestimate our ability to withstand crisis. I certainly did. If you had asked me before my injury how I would handle being paralyzed, I would have said ..."You might as well put me in a corner and shoot me."

"My new life's a work in progress, and I have to re-create parts of myself every day. "

"In my new life, I am able to use all of my assets, including my paralysis, to be a new kind of leader." (pg. 130).

From: Realizing what you're made of by Glenn Mangurian. Harvard Business Review, March, 2007, 125-130.

\*\*\* In the News: Women's Hockey at 60! \*\*\*

Of all the team sports, hockey may rank the highest in "macho" appeal. Checking opponents into the boards, charging with the puck, taking slap shots, and fighting on the ice and in the crowd are the hallmarks of hockey. Lately the sport has taken a turn to the feminine side, and women have been putting on the pads and forming leagues of their own. And age does not seem to be a limit to participation. Today the Middle Atlantic Women's Hockey Association is the umbrella organization that puts together hockey games for a variety of clubs. Players range in age from the early 20's to early 60's. Sixty-one-year-old Jackie Tanaka is a biology professor at Temple University and one of the grandmothers in the league. She got involved in hockey because her niece plays it. She learned to skate as a child, but not as a hockey player. Of the game she said, "I love it so much. I like the team concept. Being a scientist can be a lonely profession, but here, I have teammates supporting me on the ice and in the locker room." Part of the fun of a team is that they play together and then go out to a bar for food and drink. As Marcia Welsh, 51, said, "I plan to keep doing it until my body gives out." Looks like she has quite a few years to go.

See <http://www.uwhl.org> to learn more about the league.

From: Mature women take to the ice. By Don Beideman, Philadelphia Inquirer, March 18, 2007, L14.