

For Baby Boomers, Aging Is The Next Frontier

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On the first day of the first annual conference on "The Poetics of Aging" in San Francisco last week, I was chosen from a small audience to receive the touch of 97-year old Marion Rosen, a German-born Holocaust survivor who developed [the Rosen Method](#) of emotional release through movement and conscious massage.

She sat behind me and lay her warm, pleasingly dry hands on my shoulders. All eyes were upon me, so I closed my own, and surrendered. Her hands lay there, gentle and still, reading me, as it were, through my skin. What could she tell of my days at the computer, my tensions, my wounds, my strengths? I resisted the habit of describing the experience in my head and just let it happen.

I can describe it now: I felt loved. I thought I saw an orange light. I felt the grace of her being alive, still, after all she had been through, and knew that it didn't matter how truly old she was.

But part of me is lying. Because compared to her, I am young. And I would not trade the years that lie ahead of me for all her wisdom. Nor could I fail to notice her red-rimmed eyes, her use of a wheel chair, or her voice, which could not rise above a whisper.

And this is the problem. American society has ingrained in us an attachment to youth with all its associated values, and depreciated those of maturity and experience. This cultural bias has allowed us to sideline adults as they grow older, depriving us of what we can gain from our elders, says Nader Shabahangi, the Iranian-born founder of the Poetics of Aging movement and organizer of the conference.

"We talk about the prime of life. What is that? When is that?" asks [Shabahangi](#), a Stanford-educated, humanistic psychotherapist who directs a chain of Bay Area elder-care facilities he calls Age Song. "We continue to mature and develop, especially emotionally and spiritually, until we die. Imagine if we looked at each day as another opportunity to deepen, mature, grow, develop, become an elder? How stunningly shortsighted, to view aging as decline! Aging allows us to keep writing the poem we call our life."

The American cultural bias also makes the prospect of aging a very scary thing for the approximately [77 million Baby Boomers](#) who are now moving through their 40s and 50s into their 60s and beyond. This is a generation that has done things their way from the time they were teens. And if the passion for the topic expressed by the several hundred conference participants is any measure, Baby Boomers are now at

the beginning of a process of reinventing what “old age” will look like when they assume the mantle.

“Baby boomers have changed norms and started movements at every stage of our lives,” asserted Laurel Gaumer, 57, a trim and lively entrepreneur from Los Angeles. “Here we are facing 65 and we all want to keep going, to keep contributing. We want to know -- how do we do this? This society is still largely functioning from a model of aging that’s 60 years old. We look at what it’s like for so many old people today, and think: none of us wants to do that.”

“As a generation we’ve learned from experience that we can change the world if it’s not one that we want to live in,” said Roy Earnest, 57, a gerontological social worker for the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency. “Most people have a good 20 or 30 years post 50, where people can live an intensely involved life that has meaning for them. “

Which is why Shabahangi and conference chair [Dr. Sally Gelardin](#) brought in so many of the kinds of people who seem to make the most successful transitions through the older years: dancers, singers, movement therapists, yoga teachers, writers, poets, theater artists, visual artists, and story tellers, along with innovators in the gerontological field.

“I wanted to give participants time, through experiences of art, theater, story telling, engagement, interactivity, to take a look at how they stand in regards to their own aging, to ask, ‘How do you want to live your life? Are you going to go silently into the night?’ I want people to have an experience...an experiential connection to who they are.”

The 73 year old writer and theater artist [Martha Boesing](#) performed her compelling one-woman play, “Song of the Magpie,” based on a chosen experience of living as a homeless person for some five days in the streets of San Francisco. Bay Area director [Josiah Polhemus](#) presented excerpts of a new play by Joan Holden, “Counter Attack,” about stereotypes of aging working professionals.

“Life begins breathing in outside air. As I grow older, the outer world of appearance, prestige and perfection, all influences from outside sources, lessen; the inner world of imagination, gratitude and tolerance strengthen and keep me seeking wisdom and more breath,” was Polhemus’ statement.

As one presenter after another made their case, themes emerged. The known factors in continuing to live a life worth living as we age include:

- sustaining the vibrancy and awareness of the body through movement
- staying connected to other people and community no matter what the family circumstances
- maintaining activities, whether civic or creative, that stimulate continued personal growth
- doing whatever it takes to nourish and express a full range of human emotion.

And then there is that one other, special factor: love.

“I fell in love at 68,” Rosen told her enthralled audience in a gentle whisper. “It was the most exciting

thing that ever happened to me. And it hasn't stopped -- the loving. It helps you to age happily."

But even those who are not so lucky as to have a partner into their 90s can cultivate practices that sustain the positive feelings that enhance well-being despite pain or other conditions. Paraphrasing Mae West, the gentle nonegenarian admitted that "Aging isn't for sissies. It isn't something I would choose. It is limiting in a way. There are many things you no longer can do that you used to like to do. And yet -- you can feel very happy and very fulfilled with your life," she said encouragingly.

The combination of a series of gentle movement and one-on-one physical work with a Rosen method therapist have as their goal to enhance relaxation and release buried memories within the body. When tension is contacted with gentle, "listening" touch, the release tends to revive the body and spirit, practitioners -- including Dr. Shabahangi -- attest.

It's all about releasing "The aliveness of the person," Ms. Rosen said, distilling her decades of exploration as a dancer and physical therapist. "The experience of a person is IN the body. To bring it to light is to bring it alive."

Presenter [Richard Bolles](#), author of the best-selling career guide, "What Color Is Your Parachute?" -- now out in a 2010 edition -- said that unless individuals are aware of how important these human activities are at any age, and are allowed to live in situations where they are encouraged, our horizons tend to contract and emotional expectations start to dwindle, precipitating an experience of 'shrinking.'

"The traditional view of aging thinks of it in terms of work: measured by whether work is present or absent. I prefer instead to think of aging in terms of music: life has four ages, stages, or movements, just as a symphony does. Aging as music, aging as poetics, is long overdue for discussion."

And yet, work was a key concern of some conference participants who had come either to elicit ideas as they faced transitions in their jobs and careers, or as vocational counselors. The shrinking U.S. economy had left many of them unemployed much earlier than they had anticipated, and most of them still wanted -- and needed -- to work.

[Norm Amundson](#), a renowned professor in career psychology at the University of British Columbia and author of several books (*Metaphor Making: Your Career, Your Life, Your Way* (2010); *Hope-Filled Engagement* (2011)) led workshops Saturday on how to build hope and strengthen such individuals who are job seeking mid life. Many of the participants described the perplexing reality of "transitioning" in this difficult economy, and the challenges of maintaining belief that there would be another vocational chapter for them.

"Life is a story with many chapters; the most exciting segments usually come toward the end of the book. Our challenge is to make every moment count and live life to the full," his conference statement posits.

The techniques he uses develop social skills that enable us to help one another through such difficult times, such as the ability to listen, observe and sense where each person's strengths lie. Ask the job-seeker to recall a time when they were most happy in their work, whether paid or unpaid, he said, and pick apart the memory.

"By having them tell that story, you can touch what is at the root of their vibrancy -- what makes them buzz. The truth is in the details."

Listening to hopeful stories "isn't going to solve America's problems," he admitted. "But it is a tool we can use to remind people who they are. By telling a story of a strength being illustrated, you can get to the root of that person's strengths, and remind them what they can do. I've worked with the unemployed for so long, I know it doesn't take long once you're out of work to forget what your abilities are, or how recently you were capable of functioning in a job setting."

"I would love to find a new way to use my business knowledge and my art background together," said Gaumer. "But one message for me in this conference is the importance of engaging all our senses to the fullest extent possible, no matter what the work is that we're doing. And also, how can we help others to do so."

"I believe in the human potential of later life -- of older people," said Earnest, the gerontological social worker. "I came to this conference because I'm interested in learning what the latest thinking is on what people can do to remain connected. This is a really important thing to talk about, in order to begin to change the way things are."

Spearheading a new movement to change the social and existential reality of the largest, most influential generation in American history, was not anything Dr. Shabahangi set out to do. But there is coherence in how his ideas evolved, in synch with the baby boomer demographic.

Born in Teheran of a German mother and Persian father, he grew up mostly in Germany with his grandparents on their farm. "I was constantly surrounded by old people, really," Shabahangi said, "and always liked being around them."

When he came to the United States as a student at 20, he very quickly had "an older mentor," consistent with earlier educational patterns.

"It was always a natural tendency for me to just go and ask an older person for feedback or advice," he says. "So that when in my mid 30s I saw an assisted living place for the first time, I was quite surprised by the American mainstream view of aging, where 60, 80, 90- year-olds were just not engaged with the world. It was hard for me to see."

When the National Institutes of Aging were formed, he says, aging officially became a disease.

"Therefore, the idea was established that it must be something we must be able to overcome, there must

be a cure, etcetera,” he said. The focus on youth as an state that must be preserved is an internalized agism, he says; “You could call it the internalized oppressor that has taken over the mainstream.”

Conceiving of our lives as a poem in progress, you don’t know how it ends up until you’ve written the last stanza, he said. “So the idea that we are not highlighting how important it is to continue to be seen as a full human being all the way to the end is very disconcerting.”

The idea of the poetics of aging demands a profound cultural shift.

“This is not just talking about aging,” he clarified. “You can’t live without aging. The moment you are conceived, you age. To talk about anti-aging is to talk about death. When you put on your anti-aging cream, you might as well be putting on the death cream. That idea of stagnation, that I want to stay a certain age or maintain a certain look, these are all just norms and standards. It’s the soup that we swim in; it’s the culture.”

Shabahangi said that growing up as “an Iranian-looking kid in Germany” also caused him to understand the emotional impact of marginalization.

“I was quite pained by the various judgments that would always come from the mainstream culture in which I lived. This experience made me think, wait a minute, you can’t just say that because this person has dark hair that he is this way.”

The fruit of this childhood pain was clearly the compassion he developed for the elders he saw being so marginalized here in America. In 1994 he founded [the AgeSong Institute](#), an educational organization that seeks to promote awareness in the way we understand aging and of the role of eldership. It provides residential care, counseling, education, publications and research. Out of this work grew the vision of the Poetics of Aging Movement -- buoyed, perhaps, by the common experiences of the maturing Baby Boomer generation.

“It is not coincidental that the Poetics of Aging conference occurred at this time,” said conference volunteer Molly Freeman, an educator and social activist with professional experience in teaching, gerontology and public health. “Its themes are emerging in many sectors of our society and converge with the impetus for investment in human capacity across the age span ... I was inspired by the energy and momentum for change at the conference, and of the linkages of personal transformation of elders with social, cultural and especially economic changes that can raise the quality of life for all citizens.”

“We are the largest segment of the population and we’re growing. We are speaking about this issue because it’s important to us,” said Gaumer.

“As boomers retire, I see it as part of a larger movement. We all need to raise our consciousness about it,” Ernest said.

Conference Chair Sally Gelardin, who said that about a hundred people a day registered at the four-day event, expected that next year's participation would be much larger, and that she has already received letters of interest from abroad. Nor were all the participants baby boomers: a handful of 30- and 40-somethings had the prescience to be looking towards their future, with a desire to shape it.

Of all the conference participants, one of the most colorful was [Bob Kanegis](#), who came all the way from Corrales, New Mexico, with a large walking stick made from a branch of aspen. He makes his living as a storyteller, and teaches the art in many venues.

"I heard about this conference last spring and knew I had to be here," Kanegis said.

The talking stick is a ritual object, he explained to the group, adapted from various Native American traditions. It is passed from one speaker to another when members of a tribe or community sit down to discuss something. The person holding the object gets the floor for as long as he or she needs to speak, without interruptions. Then he or she will pass it on to the next person. The ritual encourages patient listening and respect for the words of others.

"The talking stick is a physical representation of our participation, our respect, and our connection to the past and future, for it is infused with all our stories," Kanegis said. "I've heard it said that when an elder dies, it's as if a whole library burns down."

At the beginning of the weekend, he asked each participant to tie a thread, a ribbon, or ornament around the stick, in the memory of any elder who had held meaning for them. By the end of the four days, the white branch was colorfully ringed with threads, buttons, charms and bright ribbons, including an AgeSong medallion that proclaimed the "freedom to be."

"The Poetics Conference started with your vision, like the talking stick when unadorned," Kanegis said as he gave the beautiful object, on behalf of participants, to Nader Shabahangi.

The diminutive [Hanna Takashige](#), of San Rafael, closed the event with an original art form she developed to communicate with an older relative with dementia. Building on her background as a singer, dancer and theater artist, she performed a kind of jazz riff, of connected sounds and expressions spanning a wide spectrum of possibilities, spontaneous, entirely nonverbal - and deeply emotive. With stunning universality of expression, Takashige incarnated the vibrancy Arundson described as vital to success; the compassion and wisdom promoted by Shabahangi, and the love endorsed by Marion Rosen.

She was the complete emotional spectrum, alive and well.

For more information, go to <http://poeticsofaging.org/>