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The Poetics of Aging

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To call aging poetic seems, at first glance, an attempt to sugarcoat what is commonly regarded as a burden we humans need to bear.



Photo courtesy AgeSong

Our Modern Day Attitude Towards Aging

If I look around, I observe a culture replete with reminders of such burden awaiting us with age and old age. Much of the public and political discourse talks about aging as a load we must carry, which costs us individuals and our society large amounts of money and resources. In short: our human race would be better off if we did not need to face this phenomenon called aging and had to get old.

Such an attitude stands in sharp contrast to the scientific understandings and wisdom traditions of human history. In fact, recent anthropological research shows that it is the rise of the elderly which was the main force in the so-called 'cultural explosion' establishing some 30,000 years ago our advancements in human civilization. How could it be otherwise? The more mature a person

in years, the deeper the source of experience and knowledge this person can pass on to those younger in years. This insight deserves emphasizing: the more a society affords us human beings to mature through the aging process, the more such a society advances in the achievement of what is commonly referred to as civilization. Anthropologists Rachel Caspari and Sang-Hang Lee state this point in the carefully guarded language of the social sciences, namely that “the increase in adult survivorship would have considerable evolutionary impact.” Stressing the importance of transgenerational relationships, they continue to conclude the following: “Increased adult survivorship strengthens those relationships and information transmission by extending the time over which people can learn from older individuals and by the increase in the number of older people, which promotes the acquisition and transmission of specialized knowledge such as that reflected in the Upper Paleolithic.”

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Elders – The Foundation of Our Civilization

Following the assertion of these anthropologists, I believe – along with many others – that older people constitute the very foundation of our present civilization. To become an older person we need to age. Aging is the prerequisite to becoming older. That this needs to be stated in a language and fashion more becoming of a two year old child shows the degree to which the present equation of aging as undesirable has permeated our culture and, so it appears, all levels of human learning and intelligence. However, paraphrasing Friedrich Hoelderlin, the 18th century genius of a poet, danger itself gives rise to what can save us. The current rapid shift in demographics, also variably termed the population explosion among older Americans or the ‘time bomb’ exploding our global economy in the years ahead, might just present the answer needed to face the plethora of planetary, economic, and spiritual crises present today.

To be ‘saved’ from the danger of our glaring misunderstanding of the value of our aging process, to ‘hear’ the answer this shift in demographics offers us searching for new ways of coping and living in today’s world, requires us to listen to what this new development wants to express. From a phenomenological point of view – literally, allowing what manifests speak for itself – this means that our elder population has a message in need of being heard. It is my bias here that the values and priorities of old age, substantially different from those of our younger, formative years, present our society with some of the potential answers able to save what we can of planet and people. I call the required attitudinal shift this viewpoint requires ‘the poetics of aging’. It is a shift that understands aging as maturation and elderhood as important and distinct a phase in human life as the phases of child and adulthood.

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The Poetics of Aging

The use of the word poetic derives its meaning from the Greek word *poein* which means to make, to create. In this sense all of us are poets who write the verses of our lives, specifically here the verses of our final years. Most good poems are composed of multiple stanzas that form a complete whole. Similarly, the final years or verses of a human life are also needed to fully appreciate a person's poem of life. The recent emergence of the discipline of narrative psychology refers to us humans continually writing and rewriting our life stories in order to create meaning for ourselves. This implies that the way we understood our lives from the perspective of youth is different from the way we look at our lives when we are older. Using the metaphor of poetry, the many stanzas of our life undergo a continual process of re-writing and editing before we are ready to submit our final poem in our later years.

While the poetics of aging refers to the individual human being working creatively on their own process of aging, that is living, it also refers to the collective poem or story we are writing as a society. For individuals are not creating their stories in a vacuum. Rather, along with many people now entering the decades of our 'older years', we are also creating a poem together. Collectively new verses are formed expressing a changed awareness about life and living. This awareness and insight contribute to what some have referred to as the making of an elderculture, of presenting America with the potential to deepen, to become a wiser, more compassionate nation and people.

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Understanding Life Differently

The poetics of aging speaks to creating a new set of priorities for life. These new priorities are not meant to substitute the concerns of present day. Rather, they are meant to augment and enrich the often narrow and more surface oriented viewpoint of a culture based principally on values expressed through youth and materialism. This view marginalizes our human finitude and mortality, ignores the depth of the soul of the world, the *anima mundi*. As a result we remain unaware of what is otherwise important and essential for living our lives. In contrast to this constricted view, priorities set by elders are shaped by a more mature understanding of life. This understanding, made possible through this journey we call aging, is grounded in life experience. It is a process that entails a tempering of the human soul through the continual exposure to the vicissitudes of life, to the joys and sufferings no human can escape. A life that is poetic in nature awaits each new struggle with a receptivity that can already anticipate the richness such experiences will bring for the writing of the next verse. The poetics of aging shuns routine and monotony. It stays open to the richness of experience. It does not waste its suffering, does not neglect to celebrate its joys.

Towards a Sustainable Future for Planet and People

The poetics of aging looks at our aging as the vital process necessary for humans to mature and

deepen, to become truly wise and human. The process of aging allows for the time needed to make who we are, to 'create' what the world needs from us. This stance might just represent the saving element able to alter the destructive course we humans seem to have taken vis-à-vis ourselves and the planet, our home. Such a stance is foremost characterized by the understanding of our interconnectedness to all life, that at our hidden core we discover an essential relationship to all beings. This discovery brings forth a deep recognition that as we harm the outer world, so we harm our own selves. As we look at the world through eyes of love, we nurture and love our own selves. Corollary, as we destroy life, we destroy our own being. The old dictum 'as without so within' expresses this reciprocity. Categories of outer and inner wane, labels intend to describe what shows itself to us dissolve.

For only if we suspend our desire and belief in knowing does what we call 'awe' appear.

The very idea of knowledge able to illuminate the unfathomable mystery of our existence has turned into a fable. Elders have learned the important statement of "I do not know." The awareness of not knowing turns into an attitude towards life and world perhaps best captured with the word 'awe'. For only if we suspend our desire and belief in knowing does what we call 'awe' appear. As we stand in awe facing the mystery of our own being and of Being itself, our senses and sensibilities now experience what presents itself to us as the miracle it really is. Once we allow ourselves to experience the miracle of life, we stop manipulating others and ourselves thinking we know best about directing our lives and filling our needs. We stop harming others. We begin relating and connecting with what is in us and with what is around us. Along with St. Francis, all of nature, inner and outer, begins to be seen as a mirror of the divine.

Renewing our Trust in Being: The Potential of an Elderculture

Many a thinker has referred to the twentieth century as the Age of Anxiety. This ought not be a surprise, as we feel anxious in the face of the unknown. The increased secularization over the last few centuries has shifted the origins of our existential burden squarely on the individual. We cannot make anyone but our own selves responsible for successes and failures. Worse yet, we cannot make sense of the vicissitudes of life, as within such a secular framework they must be interpreted as random, without meaning and purpose. We feel responsible for our own life and stay on guard against 'bad' things happening to us and those we love. Yet, the continued awareness of so-called catastrophes occurring all around us cannot help but fuel the anxiety that, ultimately, we are not in control of our lives. Within a religious framework – religion understood here as a connection to something larger, a respect for the sacred – humans share the burden life invariably presents with an unknowable force often referred to as God, the divine, Krishna, the Tao, or Nature. Here we believe in meaning and purpose of life, speak of trusting that there is something right about the events that occur, that a larger force will 'know' best what wants and needs to happen. The argument here is that as we grow into our older years, into elderhood, there is a natural tendency to move away from a belief in the individual shaping his or her own destiny to an understanding that much of life has really been out of our control and shaped by unknown forces. The process of time, of aging and maturation, thus allows for a deeper comprehension of the intricacies and complexities of human life, demands a needed respect for the unknown, the mystery, perhaps even the sacred.

Elders often teach us that we belong to a larger Being which directs our lives as much as we believe we direct our own. Such a teaching is urgently needed for generations growing up with the conviction that they need to look out for Number One, that they need to advance at all costs lest they will be considered a failure. This attitude places so much emphasis on individual achievement that the larger whole is neglected: people and planet are simply seen as tools to get ahead. Seen as tools, people and planet are instrumentalized. They lose their soul dimension. As such, this viewpoint leads to a disconnection with the world. We feel separate from it, we feel separate from our fellow human being.

... by valuing elders as wisdom keepers and teachers, we once again allow ourselves to deepen into the dimensions of our soul.

The root cause for much of our present world situation can be found in this disconnection. The way we care or do not care for our planet, the way we care or do not care for one another, all derive from the sense of connection and relationship we feel for people and planet. Is our life to be driven by personal achievement or collective well-being? Is our life governed by our own decisions or are we subject to larger forces? That these questions are unanswerable is not the point. That the questions are no longer questions being asked is at issue here.

The poetics of aging states that with valuing the aging process as maturation, by valuing elders as wisdom keepers and teachers, we once again allow ourselves to deepen into the dimensions of our soul. It is this deepening that allows us to find the perennial questions that might just offer the answers for changing the course of our present direction, for understanding more deeply who we are as people and planet.

AgeSong, Inc. – Growing Corn

Does it grow corn? This is the question native Americans would ask someone who spoke many a word in a row. Stated differently, can you actually translate those nice sounding words into practice? Can you make the abstract concrete? Certainly, it is easier to speak of a world of deep human and soulful relating than to make it happen, have it grow corn. For twenty years AgeSong has been managing eldercare communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, trying to put into practice its lofty ambition to help change the face of aging and to re-establish the role of eldership in our society. To start, such an undertaking seems overwhelming. A world where aging is welcomed and elders are revered for the amazing human beings they are, can hardly be imagined, let alone actualized. Moreover, to recreate eldership as a role in our society to which we humans aspire seems even more far-fetched given our present day attitudes. Yet, from the beginning, most goals seem unattainable.

Learning in an elder community is of depth, not information, of wisdom, not knowledge.

Let me try, thus, to paint some broad brush strokes as to how AgeSong is trying to attain its vision in everyday practice.

Foundationally, AgeSong conceives of itself as a learning organization. Herein lies the idea that all of us are continually learning, at all times and everywhere. This needs to be highlighted in a world obsessed with expertise and knowledge, a world where, all too often, we look to others to tell us what to be and do. Learning in an elder community is of depth, not information, of wisdom, not knowledge. The teaching we receive from elders is that the world is unknowable, will always remain mysterious. This awareness is so precious that it leads us to approach the world and others with a fundamentally different attitude from the one we learned in our mainstream upbringing and education: instead of thinking we need to know, we are directed by curiosity; we enjoy a beginner's mind.

At AgeSong we literally practice saying that 'we do not know'. Carepartners, interns and managers are reminded that not knowing is a higher state of understanding than pretending that we know. Such reminders set a tone of humility within the elder community. This tone signals to the world of elders that they are our teachers in this deep learning about the mystery of the world. It allows elders to be en par with those younger in years. Rather than feeling less, elders sense that they have something to give. Being able to contribute to the community of people surrounding them, our elders feel valued, respected, and seen.

Such a shift in attitude requires continual training and teaching. Every Wednesday afternoon the AgeSong community of staff and elders, of interns, volunteers and public, come together in our AgeSong Café to discuss topics ranging from our humanistic attitude towards aging, the difference between custodial and relational approaches to eldercare, the emphasis on following a person's process rather than labeling, and a phenomenological approach to capturing experience. These topics try to speak to a different way of looking at the world and our elders, a world where all can be questioned and where a person's personal experience has priority over intellectual understanding, categories and labels. Involving everyone at all times – from young interns, to Carepartners, volunteers, staff and our own resident elders – creates an air of inclusiveness, of valuing everyone's participation and voice.

The AgeSong Gero-Wellness program of some thirty master and doctoral level psychology students learning to become psychotherapists establishes a school environment where sitting and listening to others – rather than task-list orientation and constant busyness – are seen as important attributes of care. Carepartners and staff notice that conversation, being with, is valued as much as doing, that going slow is as much appreciated as going fast, that listening is valued as much as speaking. These shifts seem subtle, at first. But over time they create an atmosphere wherein elders feel like people, not objects in need of care; feel relaxed rather than on guard; feel loved and appreciated rather than endured or tolerated.

Further emphasizing the attitude that elders are our teachers are continual public education programs that bring scholars and teachers into our eldercare communities. Such programs help to humanize and revision elder communities by creating alive centers of learning and creativity. Those who visit AgeSong often remark how their image of an elder community was quite different from what they experienced in our communities.

As important as our approach to elders and eldercare is our understanding that we are educators for the families of our elders. These families often feel a large burden when they have to place mom or dad into a care community. Helping these families through this transition by highlighting

how their loved ones continue to teach our larger community of people with their rich experiences of life, that they are valued and cherished for who they are now as much as for who they have been, helps shift their attitude to aging and old age. They begin to look at their mom or dad differently. Many times, they become more engaged and interested in what mom and dad still have to offer them. This learning enriches the elder as much as it does the family. Moreover, these families now share their experiences within their own circle of friends and relatives and thus a slowly but steadily changing attitudinal shift towards aging and being an elder occurs within our smaller and larger communities of people. Thus, we hope that the AgeSong vision takes root and grows corn beyond the limits of our own communities here in San Francisco.

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Dr. Nader Shabahangi is CEO and cofounder of AgeSong. As CEO, Dr. Shabahangi ensures that the company's vision drives its decisions and plans for elder care services. In 1992, he also founded the Pacific Institute, a nonprofit organization that defines its mission as one of helping elders live meaningful lives through an existential-humanistic approach to care. Dr. Shabahangi is a frequent guest lecturer, including presenting at international conferences focusing on aging, psychotherapy, and forgetfulness (dementia). In 2003, he authored Faces of Aging, a book challenging stereotypical views of the aging process and of growing old. In 2008, he co-authored Deeper Into the Soul, a book aimed at de-stigmatizing and broadening our understanding of dementia. In 2009 he co-authored Conversations With Ed, a book challenging readers to look at dementia in different ways and in 2011 he wrote Elders Today, a photo essay describing the opportunities awaiting us in our second half of life. In the same year he also edited Gems of Wisdom, a book of poems written largely by elders living in assisted living communities throughout California. In 2012 he published Encounters of a Real Kind, a compilation of stories highlighting his innovative Gero-Wellness program where young psychotherapy interns work hand in hand with often very frail and forgetful elders in elder communities. His recently released book Ambiguity of Suffering (2014) outlines his research on the importance of understanding the underlying meaning of psychological as well as physical symptoms for individuals and the world they inhabit. Dr. Shabahangi received his Doctorate from Stanford University and is a licensed psychotherapist.

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