

# Encounters of the Real Kind

Musings, poetry, stories about elders,  
forgetfulness and life

Nader R. Shabahangi, Ph.D., *EDITOR*  
BOOK TWO

*Encounters of the Real Kind — musings, poetry, stories about elders, forgetfulness and life* (Book Two)

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Elders Academy Press seeks to change our view of aging from an undesirable process to an understanding of aging as important for our continued maturation in becoming elders. The Press thus seeks to encourage people to approach aging with appreciation and awareness so we might give back as elders to the generation that follows us.

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# Dedication

These stories are dedicated to all those who  
follow the most difficult path of all:  
learning to love.

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For All the Everyday Heroes Living with and  
without Forgetfulness and For All Those  
Who Care For Them

# Prologue

The anecdotes in this book are meant to show how precious it is to encounter mature human beings. With the word mature we replace the commonly used word 'old'. This substitution emphasizes that we are not old but gather more maturity with chronological age. By underlining maturity we move away from the biological understanding of aging and getting old to a psychological and spiritual view of human beings.

In these early years of the 21st century, research emerges which counters the stereotypical view that aging means progressive decline. In contrast, these new findings highlight that emotionally and spiritually many of us will experience their happiest years in our eighties, even nineties.

In redefining aging and old age, we are redefining what it means to be human, who we essentially are. For example, we now understand cognition to encompass not just abstract reasoning but also wise decision-making. The latter requires the ability to draw on life-experiences and as such needs the learning that comes with years lived. We are also redefining what we mean by success and achievement and are introducing philosophical concepts such as mindfulness and inner peace to our vocabulary. Such concepts question the prevalent dominance of the material world as our haven for obtaining safety and security. Rather, as we learn from those facing the end of their lives, material security has little depth when it comes to providing us humans with the ability to feel joyous and at peace in this world.

The human attributes we have cherished throughout human history and which we most often find present in our final years might guide us to a re-visioning of the priorities for what is essential in a human life. These new attributes encompass concepts such as equanimity, wisdom, patience, compassion, detachment, maturity, kindness, experience,

relatedness, mindfulness, knowing about the importance of the little things in life, the laughter, the gesture, the smile, the blooming tomato plant, the snuggling up with a partner, child, dog or cat at night.

Aging is a beautiful part of being human without which we would stay unaware, without which no one would ever reach wisdom, become generous, patient, kind and compassionate.

By devaluing aging and old age we devalue the pinnacle of human achievement: understanding who we are, understanding ourselves. We do not know ourselves at twenty, thirty, forty, even fifty. The bias here is that only in our later years, perhaps in our seventies, but more so in our eighties and nineties, do we get a glimpse of who we are, what life might be.

Because we devalue old age, devalue the achievements and attributes of old age, we allow our lives, businesses and governments be run by those who are often woefully immature. While such an attitude values profits above everything else, it damages people and planet.

It is a gift and privilege to sit with a mature human being. Through *Encounters of The Real Kind* we are reminded of what matters truly in life: a deep and genuine meeting of a fellow human being, a seeing, hearing and feeling of the other. Such encounters allow us to more clearly experience and know ourselves. For, as Lao Tzu reminds us, those who know are wise, but those who know themselves are enlightened.

*Nader R. Shabahangi*

## Introduction

“It is our elders, their life experience, skill, knowledge and wisdom that will help usher in a new era of understanding — how we can live in harmony with planet and people. And it is our elders that will lead the way to teach us younger in age, how we can reach a sustainable way of life, both in terms of matter and spirit.”

This profound statement resounded through a packed and attentive auditorium as Nader Shabahangi, Founder and CEO of AgeSong, presented his vision and philosophy of AgeSong in Australia in 2011 for the national LASA Aged Care Conference.

This was my first *Encounter of the Real Kind* as Nader’s words embodied the truth of connecting with elders and the value of experiencing meaningful moments with them. As we listened to his philosophy and the genius marriage of psychology, philosophy, quantum physics and humanistic existentialism, I experienced a sense of empowerment. Empowered to learn that one needs not just to sit on the edge of what they perceive is true elder care, but to see oneself go beyond it.

As an educator, frustrated by teaching conventional medical model aged care courses, this Encounter of the Real Kind made my heart sing. I am and continue to be a passionate advocate for AgeSong, its vision and philosophy.

*Encounters Of The Real Kind* is an anthology of relational connectedness articulated by interns from the Pacific Institute’s GeroWellness Program. This program gives interns opportunities to learn from elders the wisdom of participating in life, whilst undertaking training from educators in the modalities of humanistic existentialism and process oriented psychology.

The ethos of AgeSong provides the underpinning knowledge for interns as they implement and facilitate meaningful psycho-social programs.

At AgeSong, interns and care partners quickly understand the phrase that Nader Shabahangi created as the fundamental expression of living a life as an Elder: “Freedom to Be.” The freedom to be the elder you have become!

As you read through each page, you will be taken on a heart path where connecting souls converge just by being and honoring the presence of another human being. We are shown examples of the power that awaits us when we allow ourselves to venture beyond the bounds of what we have always believed to be true in our lives.

Eldership and personhood are celebrated daily at AgeSong through interactions and conversations which provide interns the privileged position of listening to accounts of battles won and lost, journeys and adventures, beliefs, tears shed, joys and hardships.

We all feel, at times, that we are in uncharted territory; however, through magical meaningful engagement, *Encounters of the Real Kind*, demonstrates beautifully how both intern and elder experience themselves in a new way.

It is with this discovery that we find our “Freedom to Be.”

*Rose Wake*  
*Executive Educator and Trainer, AgeSong*



---

AgeSong  
inspires us all!

---

*Lisa Sanchez*



# Freedom to Be

Quietly sitting

A wave and a smile to touch

The freedom to be

*Scott Arai*



## Missing Keys

Assisting residents into a car tonight on their way to the opera, I was asked to help buckle them in.

It took some doing to accomplish this with grace and the party was already late due to missing keys for the van.

“That’s why the bourgeois establishment in America can’t accomplish anything,” quipped one resident. “They can’t even snap a belt or find their damn keys.”

*Kevin Sweers*

---

Each day that passes  
I cry a little less  
and smile a little more  
thinking of you

---

SHEPHALI GUPTA

# Remember our Humanity

In my lifetime, I have interacted primarily with people that are living to accomplish a great achievement.

Our world reality is focused on time, agendas, purpose, deadlines, responsibilities, goals, plans, and rules.

All facets of life are attended to at a hurried pace and we believe if we slow down we will lose the race.

At AgeSong, we often interact with people living in another reality and have long forgotten the chaos and insanity of the busy world reality.

We have the opportunity to sit in silence, to ask questions, to not ask questions, to be curious, to reflect, to go for walks — to simply be.

AgeSong reminds us that we have everything we need within. AgeSong's gift is to remember our humanity and live in gratitude and contentment.

*Sophia Lever*

---

As far as the laws of  
mathematics refer to  
reality, they are not  
certain; and as far as they  
are certain, they do not  
refer to reality.

---

ALBERT EINSTEIN

# Vision of Hope

*I came across this saying quite a few years ago and have remembered it:*

Look to this day, for it is life.  
For yesterday, is already a dream  
And tomorrow is only a vision.  
But today well lived, makes every  
yesterday a dream of happiness  
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

*Christine Himm*

---

I realize that every second  
we are with someone  
is a finite gift of time

---

## Gift of Time

He had asked a few times to go for a walk. Even when he wasn't waiting for a walk or stroll to get coffee, I would see him sitting in the lobby, watching people, thinking, sleeping, or doing whatever his body and soul moved him to do at that time. We spent time together, no not a substantial amount, but enough for me to miss him now that he has crossed over.

I sat for a moment in silence, wondering if I had neglected him, if I could have taken him out just one more time, talked with him about just one more thing, held his hand, or shared another cup of coffee with him. And then I realized that I could not. The time I was allotted with him was a precious gift in its own right.

I realize that every second we are with someone is a finite gift of time. It cannot be exchanged for something else like money despite what society would have us believe. It cannot be replaced or returned like that sweater you got at Christmas. It cannot be forgotten no matter what *disease* we are diagnosed with, for it may be out of our minds but I believe it remains in our hearts.

I like to think he is somewhere, in heaven or some place in between and smiling at the memory of our time together fluttering in his heart.

At least that is the case for me.

*Christina Semple*





---

He's not angry, he's hangry.  
It's when being hungry  
makes you upset.  
Make him a sandwich.

---

JANNA O'SULLIVAN

# Struggle with Silence

It's been nearly eight months  
and I still struggle with the silence sometimes.

I studied Buddhist practices in Thailand before  
coming to AgeSong  
and I still struggle with the silence sometimes.

Sometimes I seek it out as a refuge from the activity we  
create in our lives,  
but I still struggle with the silence sometimes.

There are moments of such clarity, lucidity or activity that I  
crave the quiet,  
but I still struggle with the silence sometimes.

*Kevin Sweers*

---

To see you swimming  
Like a bird, graceful in flight  
A cherished present

---

VINCENT SIENKIEWICZ



The day was filled with logistical issues; three cabs stood us up, it was one of those typical cold and windy San Francisco days, and her legs were sore from having been in a wheelchair all day. I did what I could do. I could not stop the wind, but I could take my coat and wrap it around her frail body. I could not make the cabs come any faster, but I could call them incessantly enough to let them know we were waiting. I could not make disappear the signs of aging, the sore legs and aching feet, but I could rub her calf to make her legs forget that they were old, even if just for a few seconds. After another long ride after another long day, she mentally started to show signs of fatigue. Her frustration, anger, confusion were all palpable. It seemed hopeless. It seemed like with each mile we drove, home moved further away from us.

Finally, I got her safely back into her room. As I was leaving, feeling the weight of the day on my shoulders and asking myself why I was doing this, she said as I was in her doorway, “I will be so grateful to you until my dying day for all you’ve done for me —”

And that is why I’m here.

*Christina Semple*

## Power of Silence

Over the past month I've come to realize just how useful silence can be while being with my residents. The power of nonverbal communication through messages and signals creates a source of contact that seems to be mutually experienced on a much deeper level than connecting through spoken words. I feel grateful for allowing myself to slowly feel more and more comfortable in this channel of communication.

*Audrey Ellis*





## On Changing Seasons

December was a magical time at the Pacific Institute. Every holiday got the royal treatment but king of all experiences was my chance to dress up in “the Santa suit” and pass out the holiday gifts on Christmas day. I was amazed at how willing the residents were to play along, some of them clearly knowing it was me, but unabashedly laughing out loud each time I rolled out a “HO! HO! HO!” Perhaps even more meaningful were the residents who believed that Santa had truly paid them a visit. Tears filled their eyes, hugs were exchanged, and the feeling of happiness was palpable. No matter what the age (or religion!) All of us were children that day; laughing, playing, and believing in the magic of Christmas.

*Curtis Greenfield*

---

Music is higher revelation than  
all wisdom and philosophy.

---

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN



## Like Children

Residents seemed to become children while they were looking up to a big Christmas tree.

*Mikako Moriyasu*



I won't bore you with the specifics (read: I do not know the specifics well enough to talk about them with any sort of credibility), but the long and short of the sound healing group is that sound has a palliative and healing property on us human beings. If you want to find out more, do the research. All I can say is this: the second floor can be a wild, noisy, chaotic place. Ask anyone here and they will agree with you. However, without fail, when our sound healer comes up and plays there is a sort of transformation. Agitated people close their eyes and relax, constant talkers quiet down and begin to listen, even the king of curmudgeons sits down and listens. And when the group ends (as all good things must) there is a moment of pure, unadulterated tranquility. As beautiful as the music played in the group is, to my ears there is no sound more lovely than this.

*Vincent Sienkiewicz*

---

Music may not soothe the savage  
beast, but it can do wonders for  
humans in any number of emotional  
states (savagery included)

---