

The AgeSong Story

*Storytelling reveals meaning without
committing the error of defining it.*

Hannah Arendt

In 1994, some friends of mine asked me to help them expand their board and care home for elders located in the Richmond District in San Francisco, close to Sutro Park. Overlooking the Pacific Ocean, their small home for elders was a beautiful Spanish-style house from the twenties. Using the skills my grandfather taught me, and my new contractor's license, I designed and built an expansion to my friends' elder home, more than doubling its occupancy.

Amid the sawdust and hammering, I began to learn about the world of eldercare, and about the business of eldercare. And throughout that crucial year, while still in my late thirties, I learned about mainstream attitudes toward elders and the process of aging.

I had grown up in Northern Germany with *Oma* and *Opa*, my grandparents. They showed me a love for people of all ages, and they nurtured my enthusiasm for building and creating, my respect for nature and all animals. Without my grandparents I would not be the person I am today. To hold an attitude, then, that understands elders as inferior to young people and younger

adults, that perceives aging as “decline,” appears to me now, as then, to be simply nonsense.

Beginnings of the Pacific Institute (1991–1993)

Since 1990 I had been a practicing psychotherapist in San Francisco. This gave me firsthand understanding of the complicated nature of human beings, and of the impossibility of certainty, of simple answers.

Gathering together a handful of colleagues and friends in 1992, I started to envision the Pacific Institute for Counseling, Education and Research. The driving force behind the institute was to educate therapists—students and professionals alike—in an existential, more complex and humanistic attitude toward their work as therapists.

In 1993 I opened a mental health clinic in downtown San Francisco, in the Flood Building. The clinic provided services to low-income clients, mostly from the Tenderloin. Here I established an internship and training program for psychology students and therapists.

A Head Full of Ideas and Concepts

When I was first getting drawn into eldercare, in 1994, I had just completed my doctorate at Stanford University. My studies there were a mix of philosophy, literature, and psychiatry. I had looked at the philosophical assumptions behind the practice of

psychotherapy, and I wanted to know why the biological approach to mental health questions had achieved such popularity. It was disconcerting to me that a growing *bio-psychiatric* attitude—that a pill can treat complex states such as depression or anxiety—was becoming the mainstream form of treatment.

Much of the knowledge base established in the last few hundred years has revealed the complexity, even unfathomability, of human phenomena. In the wake of disciplines such as phenomenology, systems theory, and quantum mechanics, why had we returned to an overly simplistic belief structure in psychotherapy? Depression and anxiety, for example, are highly complex states, and as such they require compound and multifaceted approaches. In contrast, bio-psychiatry was diligently looking for singular causes for issues concerning the psychological well-being of people.

Synergy: Brothers Coming Together (1995)

In the spring and summer of 1995, I reached out to my younger half brothers, Ali and Amir. Amir had just finished his B.A. from Wharton and was working, for minimal pay, as a bookkeeper for his uncle. And Ali, after getting his B.A. from Berkeley, was a waiter at a restaurant his mother's boyfriend owned in North Beach. Both brothers seemed to have so much more potential. I

asked them to join me in my blossoming project, and passion, for eldercare.

In September we formed Synergy. Behind the name was the idea that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” We established the company with the ideal of an equal partnership, each person as one-third owner. It did not matter to me that I was much more senior in terms of education, training, skill, and experience. I wanted to create a sense of family none of us had ever enjoyed, as our parents had all divorced when we were young and had troubled relationships thereafter.

Ideals of a Young German American

Besides creating a sense of family with my brothers, I desired to forge a community that was based not on hierarchical power but on the principle of equality: irrespective of background, creed, and color, of economic status, age, sex, and privilege, my ideal was to honor the essence, the soul of each human being.

Having grown up in postwar Germany, our young cohort was shocked by the abuse of power that had occurred during the Third Reich. We were influenced by the tremendous guilt the nation and people felt about the Nazi time. Power was associated with abuse, and Germans did not feel proud to be German. Pride itself was suspect, if not forbidden. Achievements

of every sort—academic, professional, economic, social, artistic—had been used and abused for extreme, repugnant purposes throughout the Nazi era. Not a single profession, discipline, or learning had remained unscathed or proven immune to an ideology of destruction and hatred.

What was a young person to think seeing the ruins of such utter disregard for humanity by the very “elite” of the German nation? How could he make sense of such unfathomable horror, of gas chambers, eugenics, the revolting medical experiments—of genocide? Nothing had remained sacred, nothing except the human heart. Even today, I do not feel proud of my so-called achievements; memorable only are the encounters of the heart, the hand that reached out, the eyes that met, the touch that consoled.

AgeSong: Making a Difference in Eldercare

My early experience with the Sutro Heights elder home and my subsequent introduction to the world of eldercare began to evoke a sense of purpose and mission. Within the eyes of the elders for whom I cared at Sutro Heights, and those I met in other care communities, I saw my German grandparents, they who had accepted me so dearly. Their deep love and wisdom had brought me up and given my life direction and meaning. To

honor their legacy—their lives—I wanted to create temples of beauty and respect, healing environments of engagement and aliveness, places of learning and love, of acceptance and care, of light and heart.

In the midnineties I began publishing a newsletter called *The Existentialist*. My teacher and mentor, Dr. Jim Bugental, became a frequent contributor of stories and articles. Jim was eager to help me with the newsletter. For one of the issues of the newsletter he referred me to his wife, Elizabeth, also a practicing therapist, and a former nun. Elizabeth, more shy by nature, mentioned she had a manuscript in her drawer that she was willing to send me. She said I could use it in any way I thought fit.

This manuscript, really a one-hundred-page ode to the beauty of our later years, had the working title “AgeSong.” Throughout the years to come I continued excerpting parts of the manuscript in the newsletter. The more I read it, the more I fell in love with what Elizabeth was thinking and writing. Finally, some ten years later, in 2006, I decided to publish the manuscript through Elders Academy Press. While editing the book, I asked Elizabeth if it would be okay with her if our eldercare company used the name she had coined. Thus was born AgeSong. Its logo symbolizes the sun and the heart.

The vision behind AgeSong was to shift the mainstream attitude toward aging from liability to resource, and to reestablish the role of *eldership* in society. Each life is seen in its

entirety, and each phase of life builds on those before. AgeSong works toward a society where elders are seen as wisdom-keepers who can guide the younger and less experienced. While each individual must continually do his or her own work to grow and learn, society must make room for the role of elders and appreciate the tremendous value they hold for community and for the planet.

AgeSong is now a private corporation with Nader as its sole shareholder. Its mission is to design and build eldercare communities and manage them from a humanistic, elder-centered perspective. Foundationally, AgeSong conceives of itself as a learning organization. All of us are continually learning, at all times and wherever we are. Learning in an elder community is a learning of depth, not information; of wisdom, not knowledge. Elders teach us that the world is unknowable, always mysterious. Instead of thinking we need to know, we are directed by curiosity. We enjoy a beginner's mind.

At AgeSong we literally practice saying, "I do not know." Care partners, 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. Rather than feeling diminished, 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 that speak to a different way of looking at the world, through the eyes of our elders. It is a world where personal experience has priority over intellectual understanding, categories, and labels.

Continual public education programs at AgeSong demonstrate the attitude that elders are our teachers. These programs bring scholars and teachers into our eldercare communities, creating vibrant centers of learning and creativity. Those who visit AgeSong often remark how their image of an elder community had been quite different from what they experienced in our communities.

We are also educators for the *families* of our elders, who often feel a large burden when they have to place Mom or Dad into a care community. Helping families through this transition by showing 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 family members' attitudes 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 their parent still has to offer them. Naturally,

this growing awareness and renewed appreciation 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 a steadily changing attitude toward becoming and being an elder is occurring within our AgeSong communities. We hope the AgeSong vision takes root and “grows corn” beyond the limits of our own communities here in San Francisco.

Toward Hayes Valley Care (1995–1997)

In the early nineties, two German acquaintances visited in my little Mission District flat. They had ideas of opening a German restaurant with original, nonpasteurized German beer and a lighter, more modern cuisine, not the heavy *Eisbein und Sauerkraut* with which German cuisine was often associated. Thomas, a photographer turned passionate cook, visited with the much younger Fabio, son of some well-to-do German psychoanalysts. I liked them, especially when they asked me to help them find a restaurant space in a real down-and-out neighborhood of San Francisco, a place where the noise of rowdy beer-drinking folks would not turn any heads late at night. The only neighborhood I could think of at that time was Hayes Valley; it always amazed me how there was such poverty and blight a few blocks from City Hall and the Opera House.

We toured Hayes Valley. Half the stores on the block were boarded up; the restaurant we wanted to lease had been vacant for seven years; the building across the street had been abandoned and a fire in it had nearly wiped out the whole block. In short, the neighborhood felt perfect to Thomas and Fabio. A week after we found the space a lease was negotiated and signed. The following week, a tool belt around my waist, I helped the two Germans remodel the restaurant, which they called “Suppenküche.”

One day while installing new windows, I mentioned to Thomas how I really liked the simplicity of the building across the street, a two-story tourist hotel from the late nineteenth century. A year after their successful launch of Suppenküche—long lines waiting to get in were the norm, not exception—Thomas called me with the news that some real estate brokers with potential buyers were circling the building. Not thinking much, I called a friend who was a real estate agent and asked her to help me look into purchasing the building. I was a teaching assistant at Stanford with an income of one thousand dollars, half of which I was spending on individual therapy sessions; and the money I earned from low-income clients at my slowly growing mental health clinic did not even cover my office rent. But something propelled me to push; somehow I was confident that I would be able to buy it and fulfill my dream of a beautiful elder community. A year later we had a valid purchase contract,

which along with a quickly written business plan we three brothers took to an investment bank. After a few rounds of negotiations, the bankers actually lent us enough money to restore the building and create a beautiful elder community called Hayes Valley Care.

The GeroWellness Program (1995)

All the while I was building Hayes Valley Care, I continued supervising students of psychotherapy for their required internship. This meant that twice, sometimes three or four times a week, I had to catch the 21 Bus to the Flood Building so that I could supervise interns and see my own private clients.

One intern, who had just lost his mentor, an eighty-year-old man, asked me if he could work at Sutro Heights and be with the elders. I thought it a great idea. John, my intern, blossomed in his work with elders, while the elders themselves felt they could share in intimate ways with him. This experience gave rise to what was to be named years later the GeroWellness program. In retrospect, it seems obvious: psychotherapy students trained in the art of listening, of being present and attentive, spend time with elders who desire to share their life stories, their experiences, learning, and wisdom.

The academic training many psychologists are given is often based on simplistic models of "fixing" people, of

diagnosing and then treating the symptoms diagnosed. This model is outdated in that it overlooks the *meaning* symptoms possess for the individual. Psychotherapy students who spend time with elders quickly learn that there is nothing to fix, but only to accept; that there is nothing to diagnose and treat, but only to be present with and attentive to the other. This is the true art of psychotherapy: deeply listening, and being in the world of the other.

Being Seen

As a dark-eyed, dark-haired little boy in Teutonic Northern Germany, I was sensitized early on to the wounding that occurs when the outside world judges you by your cover. I continually had to prove myself to the other kids, who would wait at the exit of the elementary and middle schools to beat me up. I learned to fight. And I learned how others could create their own stories about me based on nothing but their own ideas and imagination. It was painful not to be seen, painful to be judged as an outcast because of my olive-colored skin, my unusual name, my accent.

To be seen, and to allow myself to enter the world of others so I could understand how they understand the world: this became my passion. There is an existential psychotherapeutic

and philosophical attitude that deeply appreciates the subjectivity of each person, the way each one of us makes our home in our subjectivity. This spoke to me like no other understanding of life.

Camus and Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky and Heidegger, Joyce and Hesse became my companions. I spent most of my youth isolated from others, biding time in cafés where I read, daydreamed, and mused of a different world from the one in which I lived. I was or became an idealist. The world, people, had to change. If only we probed a little into the world of the other, we could unfold much and discover how amazing the human being really is.

The Existential-Humanistic Institute (1997)

The central core of eldercare was grounded in an existential, process-oriented approach to human beings in general, and to elders specifically. When in 1992 a therapist friend of mine asked a group of her colleagues if they wanted to go to the newly opened Russia to teach existential psychotherapy, I was immediately curious. The next summer three of us were standing in a classroom at the University of Moscow, and then in St. Petersburg, teaching what we had learned from our mentors Rollo May, Jim Bugental, and Irvin Yalom. What began was a

ten-year teaching spree; each year I returned to Moscow to teach a slowly growing group of existentialist psychotherapists. I loved the Russians. They were extravagant. They were kind, filled with hospitality and generosity. And they loved to drink. Of course, I was tickled by the irony that Americans were introducing existentialism to a country that had given rise to some of the all-time amazing existential thinkers and writers, such as Dostoyevsky and Chekhov.

In 1997, I invited twenty of the Russian psychologists to San Francisco on a tour de force of teaching. They were all visiting the States for the first time, and we had much to explore together. When they left us after two weeks, we were all heartbroken. They had given us the gift of community, of partying—and they taught us how to drink massive amounts of alcohol without getting sick. Almost twenty years later, most of them have stayed friends with us here in the Bay Area.

Perhaps the biggest gift our Russian friends gave us was a deeper belief in our approach to helping others. For as they parted, they asked us to help them create an Existential Institute in Moscow. While contemplating this, we looked at each other and thought, “Wait a minute, we don’t have an institute like that ourselves!” Within the same year, a group of us came together to create EHI, the Existential-Humanistic Institute. EHI became a program of the Pacific Institute, operating under its nonprofit, educational umbrella. In the spring of 1998, Irvin Yalom,

renowned Stanford psychiatrist and best-selling author of existential writings, and Dr. Jim Bugental, the prominent existential-humanistic psychotherapist and author of fundamental works in existential therapy (such as *In Search of Authenticity*), gave the keynote address at the opening of our training program in Oakland, California.

Seventeen years later, in January 2015, the Existential-Humanistic Institute was selected to receive the Charlotte and Karl Buehler Award on behalf of the Society for Humanistic Psychology for its outstanding and lasting contribution to humanistic psychology.

Terra Brazilis (restaurant, 1998)

I had dreamed about reintegrating elders within the community. I loathed the thought of another “old folks home.” Placing a public restaurant in the heart of our eldercare community at Hayes Valley would be a perfect way to mix the inner world of elders with the outer world of mainstream San Francisco. I had a vision of being a wheelchair-bound elder myself one day who would simply roll into the restaurant and watch the young and pretty folks of the Bay Area—all without having to leave the building. It was also my hope that the younger folks would find an interest in mingling with the older group, just like I had enjoyed sitting with my German grandparents while listening to

their stories, being in their presence, and experiencing their full attention.

Shortly after I had completed the construction of Hayes Valley Care and our community began to fill with elders, I took my tool belt out of the closet again and started to design and build a restaurant space in the hope that surely some restaurateur would want to lease the premises. While completing the final touches to the space, I was approached by two Brazilians who showed interest in leasing it. They wanted to establish a very chic and modern Brazilian restaurant serving a fusion style cuisine that had just become the vogue in New York. Both Brazilians also loved the fact that we took care of elders. Walking down the hallway at Hayes Valley Care with them, I was impressed by their genuine pleasure in relating to the residents.

But a short time before the deal was supposed to be signed, the investment partner of the two Brazilians pulled out and walked away. Deeply disappointed, I suggested that we brothers could partner up with them. They were happy to accept, and so we began a five-year adventure, “Terra Brasilis,” filled with stunningly beautiful Brazilian waiters, a loyal clientele, excellent food, continued wine tastings—and never-ending financial losses.

The Setu Project (1999)

Setu is the Sanskrit word for “bridge.” In 1999, after establishing the GeroWellness program—our psychological care program for elders in assisted living communities—I felt the need for a *spiritual* care component within our AgeSong communities. I was led to the nondenominational spiritual practice and teaching of Sri Eknath Easwaran, a former UC Berkeley professor and renowned translator of the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the Dhammapada. In the late sixties with some of his fellow students he had started a spiritual community in the town of Tomales, in northern Marin County.

A few months before Sri Easwaran died, I took a group of our AgeSong team members to his ashram where we spent three days with his fellow teachers. We were introduced to meditative practice and to ways we might make space in our AgeSong communities for questions of transcendence—so important for many of us, especially elders approaching the last years of their lives. Easwaran's eight-point program was a good match to the basic philosophy of eldership that AgeSong tries to follow; those points contain the basic values of eldership, of a life lived wisely. They include slowing down, one-pointed attention, putting others first, training the senses, meditation, repetition of a mantra, spiritual reading, and fellowship. Easwaran focused his last years of life—he died at eighty-nine—on how to help people

die with awareness, and with a sense of equanimity and acceptance. Foremost, he wanted elders transitioning to their final phase in life to have an opportunity to talk about their feelings and thoughts. He wanted to help them *bridge* their present lives to whatever state of being or nonbeing they envisioned for themselves.

Such bridging was to take place by helping elders remember their timeless nature—that besides the body, the material being, there exists also a transpersonal self. This transpersonal part, often referred to as the soul, essence, or spirit, drives us forward, continues to persist past our mortal being. Foundational texts of human history, from the Torah to the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita and Vedas, the Tao Te Ching, and the Quran, all speak to this timeless aspect of the human being.

The Setu Project was an attempt to bridge the material world to the immaterial world. At AgeSong we created weekly and monthly groups in which our therapy interns would discuss with elders their feelings about their last years. This was meant to help AgeSong residents prepare for their final embodied years through an understanding of their mortality. Elders now had a safe and upholding place to look at their fears of dying and share their ideas and hopes for transcendence, a dialogue often missing in our Western culture.

Process-Work (1999)

Having launched EHI and finished the restaurant project, Terra Brazilis—in effect this completed the dream of Hayes Valley Care—I was tired from the nonstop of building, business, teaching, and maintenance. We had paid back the investors who helped us create Hayes Valley Care, and I was ready to be recharged with new learning and horizons.

For some time I had eyed the five-week training program in “process-work” that Arny and Amy Mindell held every winter in Portland, Oregon. A student of mine had spoken in wonderful terms of the Mindells’ work and how it complemented existential therapy, even deepened it. A few years earlier, I had participated in a large multinational forum called “World Work” and had been impressed with how process-work allowed all voices, opinions, and attitudes to be heard. Arny and Amy had impressed me greatly, too. Arny was a theoretical physicist by training; he had graduated from MIT and moved to Zürich to follow in the footsteps of Einstein. In Zürich Arny had a series of uncanny dreams, which led him to Jungian analyst Marie Louise von Franz, Carl Jung’s longtime protégé. Here was the genesis of Arny’s interest in psychology, along with a gradual immersion into the relationship between quantum theoretical questions and human consciousness. As these explorations gestated, Arny developed his own form of Jungian psychology, which he called “process-work.”

Process-work can be summarized in two words: *I notice*. As such, it is really the work of an awareness that does not judge and pathologize but “simply” says “I notice” to the one seeking help. To say that I notice is another way of saying I allow what shows itself to speak for itself. In other words, I am careful not to impose my ideas on the other. I felt at home with such a viewpoint, as it allows others to show themselves as they are, not as the observer might assume. I can now imagine how the little Persian American boy in Teutonic Germany might have felt if he had been “noticed” by such an attitude.

I took the plunge and disengaged for five weeks from eldercare, teaching, supervising, business, and EHI. In January 1999 I drove up to Portland. I was greeted there by rain. Little did I know that the next five weeks would be exactly like that: raining. But it mattered very little; the five weeks with sixty others from some twenty countries made a profound impact on me. Arny and Amy, along with their group of senior teachers, were simply amazing in showing us how to work with our own symptoms and issues, and how we could help others do the same.

Less than a week into the workshop I met a woman, Bogna, from Warsaw who would change the course of my life for years to come.

International Visitor Program (2001)

In my late twenties, I studied for a year in Paris. There I made friends with a wonderfully eccentric Catholic priest named François. Some years later, when I was back in San Francisco, a friend of François', Dr. Olivier Gagey, visited me at AgeSong. Olivier was an orthopedic surgeon as well as professor of medicine at the University of Paris, Sorbonne. We discovered a shared passion for keeping elders mobile, away from wheelchairs and walkers. While Olivier had started a training program for his medical students that was meant to teach them ways to keep their patients physically fit and thus avoid orthopedic surgeries, AgeSong had instituted its AgeWalks, which kept otherwise sedentary elders moving and walking.

We combined these two programs and created a visitor program. French medical students would visit AgeSong and experience our American elders, and our Bay Area culture. By the same token, several times a year AgeSong elders would get to visit with French guests, who brought their charm and different ways of being to our elders. The International Visitor Program became a unique opportunity for different generations to interact in a mutually enriching environment.

Today visitors from many countries in Europe and Japan and China have visited AgeSong. They have become one of the joys within our communities. These young visitors are eager to get to know Americans through the lens of personal stories, which

are more alive than what they would read in textbooks and tourist guides.

Pacific Institute Europe (2001)

I had fallen in love. Six months after my process-work experience in Portland, I was on a plane to Warsaw, where I settled into a little studio apartment in Nowe Miasto, close to the old town market square. Living quietly next to cobblestone streets, I enjoyed my introspective lifestyle, which consisted of reading and writing, photography, and dinners with my newly made Polish acquaintances.

After a few months, I became restless. I looked around and began plans for a European counterpart to the Pacific Institute, calling it, fittingly, Pacific Institute Europe. Pacific Institute Europe, similar to its San Francisco sister organization, was chartered with countering the prevailing negative stereotypes about aging and old age. This was work we had started in San Francisco. We would continue that work in Poland principally through workshops and lectures that looked at aging as a resource rather than a liability. The Polish government would also support, through a grant, the translation of my first book, *Faces of Aging*, which I was writing while living in Warsaw.

We Can Work It Out (conference, 2003)

While beginning to get to know the Polish people and culture, I also began to experience the deep-seated antipathies the Poles held toward the Russian people. As I had already taught some ten years in Russia, I had a very different experience of them, knowing them as individuals with hopes and aspirations. Previously, I had been keenly aware of the way the Russians felt about the Germans. Since at that time I was also regularly teaching in Germany, the strain between the two cultures pained me.

With this background I had the idea to organize a large conference in Warsaw, which would invite Russians, Germans, and Poles together to begin an open dialogue about their feelings toward each other. Calling the conference *We Can Work It Out*, I charged my good friend, a graphic designer in Warsaw, to create a poster and postcard. In March 2003 some fifty Germans, Poles, and Russians joined together for a three-day event in the old center of Warsaw.

After an explosive start that revealed how little each of the nationalities really knew about each other, and how much pain they had caused each other, on the third day the beginning of an understanding emerged. Small groups formed. They went out for lunch and dinner. People began seeing each other as people, not as nationalities. My dream of people coming closer

together and breaking down stereotypes began to take place. It was the beginning of a long road of emotional healing.

Faces of Aging (book, 2003)

While in Warsaw I had time, probably for the first in a long stretch, to reflect on my journey with elders. Looking at the many portraits I had taken of AgeSong elders over the last years, I began to compile these photos and write about appreciating the beauty that is visible in an old face. Thus was born *Faces of Aging*, a book celebrating the human journey that saw the aged face as revealing, at last, the true essence of a person. Much like a very humble Michelangelo insisted that he had simply taken away what did not belong to the marble block when carving his statue of David, so the human face showed itself most perfectly in its final phase of life.

This was not an easy journey. In the first years working with elders, I was as much governed by the mainstream stereotypes of beauty belonging to the young and unformed face as many of us are. It was only in time, through the years, that I fell in love with the radiance and stories in and behind an elder's face. I tried to show this through the portraits I took, each of which was taken spontaneously, as a snapshot, never posed or positioned.

Some years later, I received a note from a school in Colorado. *Faces of Aging* was being used by an adult-learning

class as a textbook, something I never imagined. In fact, I had written it as a book of appreciation, acknowledging what elders had been teaching me through the years. But I was happy to hear that others found the book valuable in their own process of coming to terms with a culture that sees aging and old age as decline, and that cannot see much value in the maturation of a human being.

Elders Academy Press (2003)

I was sitting in Bogna's tiny studio apartment one day, while writing *Faces of Aging*, when the vision of a new style of university came to me. Elders would be the teachers, within elder academies. For this to happen, elders needed to feel they had something to offer, that they had a voice. Elders Academy Press was born, a publication house focusing on writings by and for elders.

The first book I published, before *Faces of Aging*, was the long-hidden manuscript of my longtime mentor, Richard Wiseman. A professor of comparative literature and foreign languages who possessed a deep fascination with continental philosophy (principally Heidegger and Nietzsche, as well as Jungian psychology), Richard had received his doctorate from UC Berkeley. Fluent in some seven languages, he entered my life through a graduate literature class at San Francisco State

University. Still in my early twenties, I was taken under Richard Wiseman's wing and guided along my path until his death at the age of eighty-five. Richard died on February 9, 2008, while visiting with one of his old students. They were listening to Brahms's Second Symphony, one of Richard's favorite pieces of classical music.

During periods of my adult life, Richard and I would talk almost daily—mostly in the early morning, as he enjoyed the predawn hours. One of Richard's regrets was that he had so much emphasized teaching that he had not gotten around to publishing any of his writings. In Poland I had the time to review and edit one of his manuscripts; in some ways it contained the essence of his forty years of university teaching. He entitled it *The Therapies of Literature*, which spoke to his strong conviction, based on his teaching experience, that reading and studying the masterworks of literature were in themselves therapeutic for the reader. It is only fitting that Rollo May, one of the most influential existential American psychologists, contributed the foreword to Richard's book. We were able to get the book to the printer in 2003, when it became Elders Academy Press's first published book.

Zen Hospice (2004)

In early 2004, Zen Hospice, a renowned hospice in the San Francisco Bay Area, was being closed because of fire-safety issues. Turning to AgeSong for emergency housing, Zen Hospice placed its residents in our community for a few months until more permanent placement could be found. In so doing, we at AgeSong became familiar with Zen Hospice's way of caring for its dying residents, and we discovered how much those practices were in line with the AgeSong philosophy. Both philosophies emphasized a "being with" approach rather than "doing to" and honored the resident's personal process instead of imposing standard viewpoints onto the dying person. "There is no such thing as a good death," Eric, the hospice volunteer coordinator and trainer, would emphasize to us. By this he meant that each person had his or her own way of leaving this world: some wanted to leave peacefully with incense and chanting; others needed to scream at their family; others wanted to die all alone, or with a large group of friends. The only way we could honor peoples' wishes and needs was to listen to their process, pay attention to how and what they were communicating to us ("I notice"). We needed to suspend our own ideas of death and dying so that we could be open to the process of the dying person before us.

Deeper into the Soul (book, 2005)

At the core of an existential, humanistic attitude toward human beings lies a nonpathological stance. This means that every symptom is really a part of each human being, not a separate thing to be pathologized, to be seen as wrong and in need of elimination. On the contrary: any difference wants to be understood and seen for its meaning. In my work with elders, as the twentieth century came to an end, I noticed that we were admitting more and more elders who bore a diagnosis of *dementia*. Suspicious of any diagnosis, especially those pertaining to the psycho-emotional nature of human beings, I took a step back and tried to notice what I saw (again, “I notice”). I tried to notice how elders diagnosed with dementia looked at the world. I was curious to understand the purpose such a cluster of symptoms had for the elder’s life.

This is when Tom, a retired UC Berkeley professor, entered Sutro Heights and my life, and taught me what I needed to learn. Tom’s two sons brought him to my elder community one day. Tom repeatedly forgot to turn off the stove in his apartment. His sons, who visited him frequently, were alarmed, and finally convinced their father that it was time to be in a more supervised environment. They had heard about our good care and also about our GeroWellness program, which paired therapy interns with elders at our communities. Tom was a

gentle, kind, and very caring man. He had lost his wife to cancer a few years earlier. In those days he had never left her bedside.

One day my intern, John, related the following story to me during our weekly supervision session:

John had walked with Tom in nearby Sutro Park one day. At one time, when Adolph Sutro, land developer and mayor of San Francisco, had built the park, it had contained over two hundred statues. Now only two remained. One was "The Stag" and the other "Diana," the Greek goddess of the hunt. When John and Tom were passing the statue of Diana that day, Tom abruptly stood still. Looking at the inscription, he suddenly started sobbing, uncontrollably. Alarmed, John asked him repeatedly what was wrong. Finally, Tom, who had spoken little in the months he had been with us and often did not make much conventional sense when he did speak, turned to John and in perfect professorial English said: "Diana was the name of my wife. She died two years ago and I miss her so very much."

When John shared this story, I could not help but feel that Tom, the university professor, wanted to forget the death of his wife, and that along with forgetting that, he was forgetting much about how to be in life. His forgetting served the purpose of dealing with his tremendous pain of loss, and allowed him to go on alone. This story opened up to me a way of understanding

dementia not as a pathology but as a meaningful adaptation to pain and suffering, to trauma and loss. Dementia was a *forgetting* of our conventional way of being. It was a way to be in the present, not in the past or future. It was a way of being in the moment. I saw people with forgetfulness wanting to forget the no longer important in order to be free enough to remember what was always important. It was through forgetting their conventional everyday life that they could remember again their true essence.

Tom and his story stayed with me and led some years later to the writing and publication of *Deeper into the Soul*. With care partners and other AgeSong staff in mind, I created along with my Polish friend and graphic designer a cartoon-like training book that tried to express how forgetfulness was a way of living in a different world. It was up to us who care for the forgetful to be open to such worlds and be curious about them. Rather than wanting the forgetful person to rejoin our so-called normal world, we should be joining the world of the forgetful.

And using the word “forgetfulness” instead of “dementia” serves to destigmatize this phenomenon. All of us are forgetful. This fact keeps us from being separate from those diagnosed with dementia; it keeps us connected and related. In contrast, if we label someone as demented, we have in effect created a schism between the other and us. In doing so, we lose the purpose in forgetfulness.

Gloria Steinem Fundraiser (2006)

In 2005 we discovered that Gloria Steinem had written a long piece on turning sixty, which had never been published. Our young Elders Academy Press wrote a letter to Gloria and asked her if she would consider having our press publish her manuscript. Without much hesitation she agreed, and a year later, in 2006, Gloria Steinem was present for her book release party on the top floor of the Westin Hotel. Ms. Steinem's presence was a highly publicized and well-received event in San Francisco and helped the Pacific Institute increase public awareness of its mission to rethink mainstream views on aging.

The 2006 American Society of Aging Award

In 2006 AgeSong received the American Society of Aging's Excellence in Aging Business & Aging Award (small business category). Our AgeSong team flew to Los Angeles and proudly received the award; we were after the multinational company Johnson & Johnson, who received its award for large businesses. While we were awarded for our innovative mental health program serving elders in a milieu setting, Johnson & Johnson was awarded for its research on the differential diagnosis of symptoms of dementia and hydro-encephalitis. It was a big day to be noticed in this field of aging, although we had not really been thinking much about the uniqueness of our program.

Patrick Fox (2007)

While living in Poland, I was asked by a Polish government anti-aging discrimination task force about our antidiscrimination programs in San Francisco. This led me to fly with a team of Polish representatives to San Francisco, where we met with Dr. Patrick Fox, the codirector of the Department of Health and Aging at UCSF. During this meeting Patrick and I discovered a shared understanding about issues related to aging and to dementia and dementia care. Pat had written about the *social construction of disease* and was wondering to what degree social construction was at work when it came to the sudden increase in dementia and Alzheimer's diagnoses we had seen. When I explained to him the AgeSong philosophy of care, which understands dementia as forgetfulness, as a different state of being and awareness, Pat and I joined forces to write a research article in collaboration with some of our students. This article would combine our ideas deriving from sociology and psychology with the everyday pragmatics of caring for forgetful elders. The article, "Some Observations on the Social Consequences of Forgetfulness and Alzheimer's Disease: A Call for Attitudinal Expansion," was published in 2009 in the *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts*.

AgeSong at Lakeside Park (2008)

At the end of 2007 we were approached by a senior-community owner and operator in order to take over their distressed community at Lake Merritt in Oakland. I went to visit and inspect the property, which was situated across from Lakeside Park. The location and its architecture were well suited to our forgetfulness care program. We decided to purchase the property with a group of investors. After a year of remodeling, training in our AgeSong care philosophy, and instituting our GeroWellness program, we turned the community around. In 2011 Executive Director Dinah Bailes received the Best Executive Director of the Year Award given by the California Assisted Living Association (CALA) for her outstanding care and management of this community.

AgeSong at Bayside Park (2008)

In 2008 AgeSong signed a contract to build a new eldercare community from the ground up. The location was especially suited for the AgeSong philosophy of integrating elders within the larger community. Right in between shopping centers, freeway ramps, residential housing, and small commercial businesses, we built a beautiful five-story community in Emeryville, California, calling it AgeSong at Bayside Park. The building was completely modern, filled with light, outdoor wellness pools, and patios, and

constructed of natural building materials such as wood, stone, and porcelain tile. Corridors were decorated with local art, portraits of residents, framed poetry, and elder wisdom quotes. Local musicians and theater groups were continual guests, and our dining and patio areas were open for public enjoyment. Our corner café was open to the public and was a favorite of our staff as well as residents and family members. Residents were fond of neighborhood walks and visiting local bakeries, stores, and dining establishments. In 2012 the majority ownership decided to sell the community and AgeSong moved on from this community, which had taken over three years to design and build.

The Eldership Awards (2008)

The goal of AgeSong is to turn the prevalent view of “Old Age” on its head. We would like to see a culture that looks forward to growing old and understands aging as a maturation process leading, at long last, to the wise elder. The goal of life, in the AgeSong view, is to become an elder, and this takes time. Taking time means aging. So aging affords us the opportunity to grow and learn what it takes to develop the attitudes and abilities of *eldership*.

In 2008, AgeSong sought out individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area who showed qualities of eldership in order to

reward them for their continued struggle to grow and learn—and to apply their learning to the community. We held our first large Eldership Award ceremony that year, honoring Bob Levy, an eighty-year-old therapist and wealth manager whose love of connecting people has created many community projects in the Bay Area. And we honored Sensei Keiko Fukuda, who is the highest-ranking judo master in the world; at ninety-five, she continues to teach high school girls and young women at her San Francisco studio. Even though afflicted with a serious case of rheumatism, Keiko ignores the chronic pain, often demonstrating the many moves of judo herself to her students.

In the large Marines' Memorial Theatre, both elders were given the Pacific Institute Eldership Award for their continued belief in humanity and for giving back to the larger community.

Conversations with Ed (book, 2009)

In 2009, Elders Academy Press published a book with Ed Voris. Ed had received a diagnosis of dementia in 2008. Hearing of AgeSong's unique nonpathologizing view of dementia as forgetfulness, he called me from his home in Los Angeles. He wanted to talk with me about his diagnosis and hear what I thought was going on with him.

When I met Ed for the first time, I took an immediate liking to him. He was open and genuine, spoke of wanting to be useful as someone who could speak as a patient advocate for others,

and wanted to find a way to work with AgeSong, as he appreciated its approach to his symptomatology. I called Pat Fox and told him about my encounter with Ed, suggesting that the three of us meet and begin to talk about Ed's experience of forgetfulness. This was the beginning of many talks, the content of which we gathered in a book we entitled *Conversations with Ed: Why Are We So Afraid of Forgetfulness?*

We took our working relationship on the road and gave many presentations over the following years. Ed was always his witty and self-deprecating self, Pat always the wonderful professor and academic, and I the provocateur, who would exclaim that he could not wait to be demented and thus forget about the anxiety associated with making a living and paying bills. From conferences in Washington, DC, to many book-reading appearances in the Bay Area and talks in front of other care professionals, as well as Alzheimer's support organizations, we three enjoyed being together and sharing what we had learned from one another.

First International Film Festival on Aging (2009)

In our continued effort to educate society in a fundamentally different way of looking at aging and elders, we had the idea of creating a film festival on aging, which would seek out films about and with elders. Since many of us working at the Pacific

Institute and AgeSong were from different countries and we were aware of how other cultures and nationalities looked at aging in different ways, we decided in 2008 to establish the First International Film Festival on Aging. The work was done in collaboration with Sheila Mankind, who had experience in Chicago organizing similar film festivals. We reserved the large Castro Theater in San Francisco for our opening night, and over two nights in February 2009 we presented some twenty films exploring and celebrating old age and the process of aging.

The Photo-Voice Project with UC Berkeley (2009)

It is difficult to understand the world of the other. Most of our conflicts in relationships are grounded in the difficulty to see and accept the other. Yet most of us have experienced relief when we feel seen, when the other can see the world through our own eyes.

When Denise Owens, a UC Berkeley social worker from the Department of Public Health and Aging, approached AgeSong in 2009 in order to begin a research project called Photo-Voice, I was excited. The idea was to give a camera to our forgetful AgeSong elders and allow them to take photos of the world the way they saw it. The pictures were discussed with the care staff to get a glimpse of the world of the forgetful elder. Our program

became especially known after Channel 7 (San Francisco) aired a summary of the project on their late-night news program.

More importantly, with this simple act of residents taking pictures, we began to notice changing attitudes toward our forgetful elders among our care partners. They became more interested in seeing the elder's world and seemed to follow the elder's process rather their own.

AgeSong Certificate (2010)

Deeper into the Soul addressed the core idea behind AgeSong, namely to establish a training institute for care partners, to teach everyone working in conventional eldercare a new attitude toward elders and the many symptoms that come with age, including forgetfulness. Seeing symptoms as meaningful is not easy to train. It goes against the mainstream approach of labeling, of finding fault, diagnosing, and understanding difference as wrong and undesirable. Ideally, both approaches—diagnosing and finding meaning in difference—can coexist and not be seen as mutually exclusive.

In 2010 the AgeSong Certificate was born. Our care partners would undergo a rigorous training in seeing elders from a holistic, nonpathologizing viewpoint; they would learn to work with forgetfulness and so-called challenging behaviors from a place of curiosity. These behaviors were to be understood as

communicating a need, not as meaningless expressions to be extinguished through behavior control, redirection therapy, or medication. Our goal continues to be that the state license care partners and those in the field of eldercare by giving them a basic test of knowledge in how to be and work with elders. I find it difficult to accept that a hairdresser or dog groomer needs a state license to work while care partners who come into intimate contact with people do not need any certification.

Elders Today—Opportunities of a Lifetime (photo-book, 2011)

The AgeSong vision of elders as wisdom-keepers and teachers was behind the small photo-book entitled Elders Today—Opportunities of a Lifetime, published in 2011. The book was designed to be easily read and accessible. It contained photos of elders from all the communities we were managing at that time. We hoped the book would illustrate our defining difference in eldercare to our new residents' families and friends.

Gems of Wisdom (book, 2011)

In 2011, a representative of book publisher Barnes & Noble approached AgeSong with the idea of creating a book of writings and poetry by elders. A year earlier Barnes & Noble had published a book of writings by teenagers. I loved the idea and

we began to send out an announcement to other assisted living communities to invite elders to submit their writings to an assembled jury of judges. Those judges would decide which of the submissions would find a place in what we would call *Gems of Wisdom*. This project was great fun, as many of the submissions were witty, heartwarming, and deep. And it was especially moving when the published authors were invited to a book signing at Barnes & Noble in Emeryville, California. Some thirteen authors made it to the book signing and congregated at a long table while customers passed by to get their copies signed.

Poetics of Aging (conference, 2011)

During the time of the Shah, when you flew into Tehran International Airport, then called Mehrabad—"the place built on kindness and love"—you would find large statues of the most prominent poets of Persia greeting you upon exiting your flight. This speaks to the deeply poetic nature of the Persian people. From Rumi to Hafez, from Saaid and Ferdosi, to Omar Khayam and Nizami, Persian poetry has become renowned for its profundity and timelessness. Omar Khayam was a favorite of the nineteenth century through Fitzgerald's translation and adaptation; Rumi, through the translation of Coleman Barks, an almost mainstream favorite from the sixties to the present day; and Hafiz, thanks to Daniel Ladinsky's latest translation, an

underground best seller. Take the following simple lines from Hafiz: "Even after all these years the sun never turned to the Earth and said: Hey, you owe me! Listen, what happens to a love like that? It lights the whole sky!" Or: "Blame keeps the sad game going. It keeps stealing all your wealth, giving it to an imbecile with no financial skills. Dear one, wise up." Take Rumi: "Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing there is a field. I'll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about." Or: "What you seek is seeking you." Or: "Forget safety. Live where you fear to live. Destroy your reputation. Be notorious."

These lines are pearls of wisdom for whoever is curious, whoever seeks. The word "poetry" derives from the Greek *poesis*, to create. Perhaps the most precious creation we can undertake is the creation of who we are. Nietzsche was fond of saying that the goal of life is to become who you are. And that is an unfolding process of shedding what is unimportant, what is not us. It is removing from the raw block of marble that which does not belong so that what lies beneath—ourselves—can be freed. This process of becoming takes time. Without time—in ancient traditions time was equivalent to God—we cannot become. The process of aging, then, is the process of becoming. This awareness led me to organize and hold a four-day conference in San Francisco in November 2011 called the *Poetics of Aging*.

The idea was to link the process of becoming human to the process of aging. We cannot become who we are without being able to age.

The conference was quite a success, underwritten as it was by some fifty organizations, including local major universities such as Stanford, the University of San Francisco, UC San Francisco, and UC Berkeley. My old professor, Rush Rehm, who ran the classics and theater departments at Stanford, joined us. Each day his theater students presented short performances from the great existential writers, such as Samuel Beckett and André Gide, as well as scenes from Shakespeare. Dr. Pat Fox presented his papers on the construction of Alzheimer's disease as a means of assuring funding for research; best-selling author John Gray talked about gender issues and aging; and many artists presented on the deepening of creativity as we mature. Marion Rosen, who died two months after the conference at the age of ninety-seven, spoke on the importance of working with the body in order to more fully understand who we are as a mind. She was very impressive in asserting that "the body knows," as the ancient Greeks were fond of saying. Finally, Stagebridge Senior Theatre gave many a performance; its cast of actors, ranging from seventy to ninety-five years, demonstrated how much fun it is to keep playing and creating into our later years, how our way of being can become lighter and easier when we keep shifting our mind-set away from decline and toward deepening.

First Green Kitchen Award in Assisted Living (2011)

It is a well-known statistic that elders in assisted living are often dissatisfied with the quality of food presented to them. At AgeSong we have focused much attention on how we can move away from the mind-set of food as an element of caloric and nutritional value to understanding our need to eat as a social and communal event celebrating our very humanity. We enlarged on this mind-set and began to change our kitchen to embrace organic and local foods from the farmers' markets.

In 2011 AgeSong at Lakeside Park, in Oakland, received the first Green Kitchen Award in the American Assisted Living Industry, paying tribute to our respect for food and for our elders. As recipients we now had to pay better attention to how we were using water and energy in our food preparation. This began to create awareness around the greening of other aspects of our elder communities, such as how we were dealing with the waste we generated and how we went about recycling and energy use. Given the relatively large roof spaces of our communities, we also began to look at solar electricity and solar-heated water.

Encounters of the Real Kind (book series, 2012)

For many of the early years of the GeroWellness program I struggled to demonstrate to AgeSong's many stakeholders—from family members to professional caregivers to investors—the contributions our psychotherapy interns made to the care of our elders. The idea came that interns could write anecdotes and stories about their encounters with the elders with whom they were assigned. This gave birth to a series of books I called *Encounters of the Real Kind*. These were *real* encounters because they were deep meetings, not cocktail talks or coffee klatches.

These books—the third volume is in the works at this writing—hope to share how valuable it can be to encounter mature human beings. The word “mature” replaces the commonly used “old,” a substitution that emphasizes how we accrue more maturity with time and advancing age. By underlining maturity we move away from a biomedical understanding of aging to a psychological and spiritual view of human beings.

In redefining aging and old age, we are redefining who we essentially are as human beings. 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, good decision making depends on the learning that comes with years lived.

We are also redefining what we mean by success and achievement and are introducing nonmaterial concepts such as mindfulness and inner peace to our vocabulary. Such concepts question the prevalent dominance of the material world as our haven for safety and security. We learn from those facing the end of their lives that material security has little to do with the ability to feel joyous and at peace in this world. New research highlights that, emotionally and spiritually, many of us will experience our happiest years in our eighties, even our nineties.

The human attributes cherished throughout history are what we most often find in our final years. Shouldn't this guide us to revise the priorities for what is essential in a good life? Let us reconsider equanimity, wisdom, patience, compassion, detachment, maturity, kindness, experience, relatedness, and mindfulness. Can we learn from our elders the enduring importance of the little things in life—a laugh, a gesture, a smile, the blooming tomato plant, the snuggling up with a partner, child, dog, or cat at night?

If we devalue aging and old age, we devalue the pinnacle of achievement: understanding ourselves. We do not really know ourselves at twenty, thirty, forty, even fifty. The bias that shines throughout *Encounters of the Real Kind* 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, of what life might really be about. But because our society devalues old age, and

the achievements and attributes of old age, we allow our businesses, governments, and indeed our lives to be run by those who are often woefully immature. Such an attitude values profits above everything else, while 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 seeing, hearing, and feeling of the other. Such encounters allow us to more clearly experience and know ourselves. As Lao Tzu reminds us, those who know are wise, but those who know themselves are enlightened.

Forget-Me-Not Café (2013)

A central goal of AgeSong is to abolish the idea of an old folks home. Eldercare communities ought to be integrated within the larger neighborhood and community, not separated from them. In order to forge this link, AgeSong created a public café space where the outside public can join and meet our inner community of elders. Different generations and people from all walks now meet in a space where they can see and appreciate each other. The Forget-Me-Not Café is allowing the young and the old to come together, to hang out. A diverse crowd of café-goers is enjoying the laid-back atmosphere and is connecting with elders of all stripes. These experiences give younger people

genuine opportunity to interface with elders, and provide compelling, felt proof of the value elders bring to our communities.

Ambiguity of Suffering (book, 2015)

As a young boy I had always been intrigued by my mother's migraines and how without the use of any medication they seemed to disappear when she had a chance to talk with her doctor. My mother always took me along on the walk to her doctor. She would be in terrible pain when we entered the physician's waiting room. When the doctor called her in, I was often allowed to come along, sitting in the far corner of the office and pretending to look out of the window. I do not remember what Mom and her doctor talked about. I knew that she liked him very much. He was an older man, and all the hair left on his balding head was fascinatingly white. After they had talked, often in whispering voices, Mom would get up. I could see in her face how the pain had lessened. By the time we had walked home, Mom was a changed person, feeling much relief. Since as a sensitive boy I would closely experience my mom's suffering, seeing her face freed from the burden of pain also freed me from the burden I was experiencing.

How do we conceptualize and care for our mental health? This was the question behind a long-term project derived from the research I began during my doctoral work at Stanford. The experience with my mom's migraines and the subsequent mysterious talking cures with her doctor had left a deep impression on me. Certainly, I was left wondering about the plasticity between the mental and physical spheres. Later, in my teenage years, I became fascinated with microbiology and then, in college, with the philosophy of biology, an intersection between two worlds that I have always pondered. In graduate school I studied Freud, and I saw how he too had struggled with the relation between mind and body, whether we should see biology or psychology as foundational to health and well-being.

In the late twentieth century I witnessed the resurgence of bio-psychiatry, and these fundamental questions became more intense for me. The bio-psychiatric approach to mental health and illness understands neurobiology as primarily responsible for the emotional issues we face as people. This approach disregards the emotional, subjective, and highly complex dimensions of mental health symptoms. As such, bio-psychiatric treatment—the idea that a pill can address the almost infinite complexity of our psychological issues—represents a return to an overly simplistic understanding of human beings. It also disregards the *meaning* behind symptoms, that our suffering can, and almost always does, deepen our humanity. Medication

treatment is akin to managing a wound by simply covering it with a Band-Aid. We do not see the ambiguous nature of suffering, that it deepens as much as it pains us.

While at Stanford I researched these ideas in more depth and wrote in academic terms about this issue. I had a hope that somehow, with time, the bio-psychiatric mind-set would lessen. But it did not. Indeed, more and more mental health professionals have jumped onto the bandwagon of medication treatment for the psychological issues all of us face as humans. This led me to continue to write on this subject. *Ambiguity of Suffering* was published in early 2015.

Guru Project (2015)

The Guru Project is the brainchild of two GeroWellness psychotherapy interns in our Hayes Valley communities. Taking the AgeSong dislike for the medication of behaviors one step further, we began to regard complex and challenging behaviors in our elders as teaching moments about the world and its people. These elders challenge us to be more open to diversity within ourselves and outside of ourselves. They are our gurus. Rather than medicating behaviors with psychotropics, as has become commonplace in eldercare communities, AgeSong seeks to understand those behaviors as expressing a *need*, which teaches us to see the world through the eyes of the elder.

Already in its first year the Guru Project limited and sometimes prevented elders from being on what are often very harmful psychotropics. Elders are being seen for who they are and how they appear, while care partners and therapists push themselves to deepen their understanding of people's psychology and way of being. Rather than pathologizing behaviors, we search for the meaning behind them. Rather than normalizing certain behaviors to fit some social code and standard, we celebrate difference and remain curious and open to the unfamiliar.

To launch the Guru Project we invited Dr. Al Power and Dr. Richard Taylor. The former is a noted physician and author of *Dementia Beyond Drugs*, and the latter is a psychologist who was diagnosed with dementia some ten years ago and has been speaking as a patient on his experiences. In 2006 Richard wrote *Alzheimer's from the Inside Out*, an intimate book describing his journey from diagnosis to living with such a diagnosis in this society. Both speakers stayed with us at AgeSong for a week, training our staff and doing public presentations with us.

AgeSong: A Vision for the World (2015)

Behind the AgeSong vision of a more respectable eldercare and a reintegration of elders into all of our lives, lies the hope that the experiences and wisdom of our elders will

inform and guide those younger in years. Specifically, it would be a gift to our society, to planet and people, if the mindset of those who have struggled to achieve awareness throughout their life would be seen by those younger in years as an alternative to living the current mainstream and unsustainable way of life. Perhaps this is what has driven me in these last twenty years to keep creating and refining AgeSong, namely my desire to find a way to live closer to my inner sensibilities of being in this world. Those sensibilities include a slower, more reflective way of life, paying more attention to the moment and to fellow human and my own needs. Here it is important to me to learn to listen again to my inner voice, a voice spoken by what I call my 'inner elder'. My inner elder already knows about my life just like the little acorn already knows about the full oak tree it wants to become. As within the acorn lies the path of the full grown tree, so within each of us humans lives the 'inner elder' who knows the path to take – if only we would listen to him or her. These voices we call alternately 'hunches', 'intuition', or 'gut feeling'. Sometimes we even speak directly about 'an inner voice' which talks to us in time of need or uncertainty.

Behind the vision of AgeSong lies also my desire to have ideas 'grow corn', become real in praxis. This has been my ongoing struggle from early on in life: how to translate an idea into something tangible, something that can be tested, holds water in the so-called real world. It has never been quite enough

for me to know a mathematical formula, for example. Rather, I needed to see it applied and work in the everyday world. This led me in my early twenties to enter the world of engineering and in later years to becoming a contractor and therapist, someone who could put vision, ideas and emotions into something practical, visible and livable.

At the most innermost core of AgeSong, at the essence level, we can find the effort to learn to love. We learn to love when we are pushed to accept others, when we need to suspend our own way of being and love the other for who they are, not how we want them to be. Working with elders, with often frail, quite vulnerable people who are approaching the final days of their lives, brings into awareness our own fragility and mortality. We are together with the 'marginal', the very old who have their own, often whimsical and mercurial ways of being. We shower and clean them, help them eat and groom themselves, slow down to be at their pace, learn to accept their reality, their ways of thinking and being quite different from our own. Whereas it is easy to love what is same or similar to us, in being with elders we are pushed to love what is different, often very unlike us.

Throughout recorded human history, learning to love has been understood by the truly wise to be the ultimate task, the lofty goal of becoming and being human. Learning to love is also another way to explain what is meant by 'spirituality'.

Present day evidenced-based research reveals more and more how being kind and loving to others promotes health and happiness in both receiver as well as giver.

Our present way of dealing with conflict is based on the idea of 'an eye for an eye' and thus perpetuates conflict, violence and hate. We might want to break this vicious cycle through our understanding that love begets love. For learning to love what is different from us on the outside also has the benefit that we can learn to accept what is different in us. As we learn to accept diversity without, so we learn to accept our diversity within, learn to accept and love who we are. Again, as we give love we receive love, as we are kind to others, we are kind with our own selves.

St. Francis of Assisi, the patron of the city of San Francisco which gave birth to AgeSong, has phrased this truism succinctly with the words that *it is in giving that we receive*. In however small a way, AgeSong would like to contribute toward helping strengthening such a loving stance and attitude to all that exists in this world. It is common to say that we owe such a world to our children. I'd like to add that we also owe such a world to our elders who have lived their lives with the hope that one day all their toil and labors would help create a better world.

It would be ever so wonderful if one day we could turn to them, stating, perhaps even emphatically: "Yes, indeed, your life has made a difference. Thank you for all you have done."