

**Notes from the August 14 VAN Meeting/Experience
Red River Room, MN Dept of Health, Snelling Office Park, St. Paul**

Present

Karen Bowen, Thor Carlson, Jane Cunningham, Carol Daly, Alice Evans, Tom Gossett, Chuck Gribble, Jon Groth, Andy Halper, Jan Hively (recorder), Jan Jernell, Rich Kessler, Judy Larson, Mary Maher, Brian McCaffrey, Sue Meyer, Malcolm Mitchell, Barbara Muesing, Janet Pelto, Pat Samples, Diane Shuck, Terri Spillers, April Schnell, Steve Wagner (plus a couple of others who missed signing the attendance list)

**Exploring the Meaning and Possibility of Vital Aging
Andy Halper**

Jan Hively introduced Andy Halper. Andy is a former faculty/staff member of the Center for Community Integration who left the U of M to start his company, Social Imaginations, Inc. Andy provides innovative ways to plant seeds of change, encourage new insights, and experience new ways of communicating. He is known for his education programs for youth and teachers in schools and community agencies, especially for a performance learning approach called "Hip Deep." Recently, Andy has been working on strategies to help people think and act differently about aging, thus experiencing the positive aspects of aging. Last month, he took a group of 70 to 88 year-olds on a two-night camping trip. As a VAN participant, he offered to provide the program for this monthly VAN meeting.

Introductions and preliminary discussion. The meeting began with participants sitting in rows, audience style. Andy invited various people from the group, beginning with first-time participants, to introduce themselves and tell why they are present. To stimulate discussion about the meanings of vital aging, he asked a couple of the participants to read some quotes, and the group to talk about them:

- * Life can be sensational at any age -- if that's the way we build it and live it.
- * We need to carefully think about who we want to be in our elder years --- and about the skills and life experiences that will allow us to help and remain connected with others.
- * Fun and laughter help us celebrate that at any age our lives can be full, whole, complete --- still expanding to "fill up our still alive potentials." Rabbi Abraham Heschel
- * Zorba the Greek, to the old man planting trees: "You live as if you will live forever, I, as if I will die tomorrow." Which one is right?
- * We ought to enter old age the way one enters senior year at the university -- with exciting anticipation.
- * What advice would you give about aging to people who have just turned 50?

*Only a few people are endowed with the rare and supreme courage to age without embarrassment.

* Why do some see aging as a negative rather than a victory.... a privilege?

* Overcoming ageism will require ongoing education and commitment, much as overcoming racism has over the past few decades. An entire stereotype will have to be reversed, along with all the habits of thought that perpetuate it!

* Have you ever experienced "ageism"?

* Ours seems a twin problem: the attitude of society toward the old and old age, as well as the attitude of the old to being old. Question: Does society think of older people as deprived and forgotten, masters of yesterday, outcasts of today?

The word "attitude" came up frequently during the discussion.

Organizing the circle. Using no numbers, only descriptions about "the way it was" when they were born, the participants organized themselves and their chairs into a circle, ranging from the youngest to the oldest in the group.

What do you want to do when you grow up? Andy asked people to write down, and then share, their ideas about what they have always wanted to do but never done. After some reporting had occurred, he mentioned that he had always wanted to play the drum. He went and picked an African drum off of the shelf and demonstrated his proficiency.

The heartbeat of life. Drums began to sound from outside the room. Three of Andy's associates drummed their way into the room. They talked about their use of drums to stir imagination and vital involvement. They also use drums to teach people about the importance of respect -- respecting and supporting each contribution. They brought 30 drums and other rhythm instruments into the room so that everyone had something to beat. They taught the group the basic beat, the call, and a couple of standard endings.

They organized the group so that different people played different rhythms.... together. Then, the group created a steady low beat over which each participant told about what difference they hope to make through their involvement with Vital Aging...followed by an acknowledging rhythm. Then, each participant was given an opportunity to "do his/her thing" with his/her instrument...followed by an acknowledging rhythm. The group followed the leader in swelling and then dropping the intensity and sound of the beat.

After collecting the drums and having a break, Andy gave people a chance to reflect on the drumming experience. He received an ovation for creating the stimulating learning experience.

What's New.

Age Odyssey. Several of the VAN participant will be offering workshops at the annual Age Odyssey conference sponsored by the MN Board on Aging, DHS, MAGEC, etc. Dawn Lindblom on "How to Attract Baby Boomers to Volunteer Service." Malcolm Mitchell and Tom Gossett on the Living at Home Block Nurse Program. Jan on "What Older Workers Want and Need." Jane Cunningham on the "Learning in Retirement Network;" and others... The conference will be held August 20-22 in the St. Cloud Civic Center.

The Vital Aging Network will be the topic of a breakfast roundtable session at the St. Cloud Civic Center on Tuesday, August 21, from 7:45 to 9:00 a.m. Everyone is welcome (needed!).

Books mentioned.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly: A Memoir of Life in Death by Jean-Dominique Bauby, Vintage Books, 1998

Our Turn Our Time: Women Truly Coming of Age, edited by Cynthia Black, Beyond Words Publishing, 2000

Good for discussion in small groups. Pat Sample has contributed one of the chapters. She will bring some copies to the next meeting.

Other meetings.

Brian McCaffery is working on a Spirituality and Vital Aging conference to be held at Central Lutheran Church in Mpls. on November 3.

The School of Public Health is holding a public roundtable on "How Communities Support Vital Aging" on November 2.

The U of M and MnSCU is holding a Workforce Development Conference on November 1, which will include a workshop on "Recruiting, Renewing and Retaining Older Workers."

Next Meeting, Tuesday, September 11, 10 to noon

Jan Jernell is checking out arrangements to use the same MN Dept of Health space for the third month. Jan will talk about how the Health Dept. sees itself and its work in relation to Vital Aging.

Pat Samples will provide an hour-long presentation/discussion for the September program, on the topic of "The Body as a Resource for Learning in Old Age."