

Notes from the September 11, 2001 Meeting of the Vital Aging Network Red River Room, MN Dept of Health (MDH), Snelling Office Park

Present

Shelby Andress, Sue Carter, Mary Cahill (MDH speaker), Kathy Celley, Eileen Collard, Jane Cunningham (chair), Connie Feig, Hal Freshley, Karen Greer, Chuck Gribble, Jan Hively (recorder), Candy Kragthorpe (MDH speaker), Mary Maher, Sue Meyers, Ashley Todd Partridge, Pat Samples (speaker), Steve Wagner, Pam VanZyl York (MDH speaker)

Handouts

- *Older Drivers Not a Menace to Public Safety*, Natl Council on Aging News Bulletin, Sept 10, 2001
- *Welcome to the Vital Aging Network (VAN)*, handout used at Age Odyssey conference, August 21,, 2001
- VAN Website layout, outline, overview of Resource Manager
- Feldenkrais Resources
- *Brain Gym* brochure
- *Whole Brain Solutions* newsletter, 1999
- *The Phoenix*, August 2001 newspaper
- *Writing Your Own Permission Slip*, flyer for October 17-November 20 course in personal freedom writing, taught by Pat Samples
- *Strike Out Stroke; Arthritis doesn't have to slow you down; Alzheimer's and memory loss*. Three brochures distributed by MDH
- *RFP for Suicide Prevention*, MDH

Pat Samples: "The Body as a Resource for Lifelong Learning"

Jane Cunningham introduced Pat Samples as the author of six books, including *Daily Comforts for Caregivers* (Fairview Press 1999), *Self-Care for Caregivers: A Twelve-Step Approach* (Hazelden 2000), and *Comfort and Be Comforted: Reflections for Caregivers* (ACTA 2001). Pat has a masters degree in human development and has been speaking and giving workshops on aging, caregiving and other personal development topics for 10 years. She is also the editor of *The Phoenix*, a Twin Cities-based wellness newspaper.

Pat prepared the group for listening and reflection with two exercises and handed out ribbons to keep our fingers occupied while we were listening. Pat talked about ways to: 1) expand body awareness, 2) retrieve what we know and awaken new possibilities through play, and 3) enhance learning through the use of the body.

Pat drew several of her points from James Hillman's book, *The Force of Character and the Lasting Life*. As Hillman said, aging is an art form, although many in our society fear aging and identify it as a pathology. The main pathology lies in our ideas about later life. We tend to see two options -- be resigned and let it happen, or fight it (with jogging, face lifts, etc.) And then there is the option of vital aging -- which should include learning

more about what we are capable of. Our bodies have all the elements we need for experiencing and learning, but we've been confined to head and hands learning for much of our lives.

1) Expand body awareness. Our attention tends to be focused on our extremities, or on the places where we feel pain. Through the Feldenkrais approach, people learn how to expand body awareness through tiny, slow movements. The goal is to move as seamlessly as possible, through a discipline that is quiet, relaxing, centering, and pleasurable. Pat demonstrated with a Feldenkrais exercise that raised awareness about the hidden intelligence in our body parts. In these days, when everyone is rushing, it is enjoyable to experience slowness.

Often, people are concerned because they experience sleeplessness as they grow older. Hillman suggests that you come to know during the night what you cannot enter during the day. Ram Dass talks about "waking up to the night." Sleeplessness may be an invitation rather than a problem. The question is, what does our body have to teach us?

2) Play. The body is a library of life experiences. Play is a way to retrieve what we know, and to awaken possibilities. By doing things differently, you can access a reserve of information. Pat's course on "Writing your own permission slip" uses imagery and music to reveal the stories that our body has to tell us.

Sam Keen, in *Learning to Fly*, describes how he learned to be a trapeze artist when he reached age 60. Pat took a course called "Introduction to Circus Movement." She learned how to trust her body, even into a leap. She eventually learned also how to "celebrate the sacrament of defeat."

3) Enhance learning by using our body. Brain Gym, developed by an educational therapist Paul Dennison in 1969, using neuroscience and kinesiology research, is used in schools and nursing homes. It teaches 4 steps for readiness and 26 activities. Pat demonstrated with a couple of energizer exercises. Listen to your body....What does it want to learn next?

The body has a remarkable ability to compensate. We can help it advance those compensatory activities. Here are some tips about how to strengthen the body's capacity to learn:

- Use your whole body to learn actively
- Create excitement about what you will learn
- Preview -- rehearse what you want to learn or do
- Have a goal -- say it aloud -- write it in big letters
- Use stimuli such as music and aromas to heighten awareness and accelerate learning
- Heart Math is a process for tuning into love and appreciation. Look it up through either <www.heartmath.org> or <www.heartmath.com>
- People over 60 are better at associating information with other information -- they have more of it to associate

- Create and tell stories for learning -- creating context
- If you have to learn or memorize something, break it down into small chunks of information
- Learn one part of the information while in one part of the room, and another in another part, so that you will have a spatial orientation to help jog your memory
- Talk it into a recorder or into voice mail -- write it out -- sing it out in your car

Discussion.

- The American Society on Aging presents Mind Alert Awards. This year's went to a professor at Cornell who has written mind exercise books. She will send us her revised materials this fall for the VAN website.
- Shelby Andress mentioned her experience with Feldenkrais in which the facilitator dealt with tensions separate from the area of pain, which helped relieve the pain.
- Pat described the ways in which people remember through their bodies. The feelings are awakened as they try out the exercises.
- Ashley Montagu encourages the retention of feelings and attitudes from throughout life....for example, the wonderment that a child expresses, that looks like ecstasy.

Pam York, Candy Kragthorpe, Mary Cahill, MDH: Health Promotion for Older Adults

Pam VanZyl York is responsible for health promotion programs related to nutrition and physical activity. She mentioned that the focus has been on children over the past years. It requires creativity for staff to figure out how to spread out the resources to cover lifelong needs. "Compression of morbidity" is the current philosophy -- expanding the healthy years of a life span, and encouraging people to move into their '80s in good health. Vital Aging fits this emphasis. It's important to provide vital aging role models for younger people.

Pam handed out the brochures on Stroke, Arthritis, and Alzheimer's disease developed collaboratively by MDH with other service agencies handed out to older adults in many locations such as clinics, senior centers, congregate dining, etc. They all say that eating well and being physically active is the key to being well during later years. Although there are a lot of eating rules to lower cholesterol, etc., they focus on "eat more fruits and vegetables" as the one nutritional message that maximizes health effects.

MDH's secondary audience is service agencies and organizations. The materials tend to focus on the 40+ age group who have one or more risk factors for chronic disease, to assure early ID and education. Coordination among agencies is tough, although there has been expanding collaboration between the Centers on Disease Control and the Area Agencies on Aging. When it comes to finding funding for new efforts, however, the rhetoric is great, but the dollars are missing. MCH has the capability to gather data. Integrated secondary prevention is the goal. There will probably be relevant public policy proposals in the next legislative session.

Candy Kragthorpe works with mental health and suicide prevention. Older adults attach a stigma to mental illness. Mental health links the body with its physical and social environments. Older adults, 65+, have the highest rate of suicide. Candy handed out an RFP for Suicide Prevention. MDH is looking for community-based efforts that look at mental health cross the spectrum and include in the planning those affected by a risk of mental illness.

The VAN participants suggested that Mental Health and Vital Aging should be a topic for a future meeting.

Mary Cahill works with the frail elderly. She is interested in promoting efforts for health care providers to take responsibility for improving the quality of life for those with chronic health problems and mental health issues.

MDH is interested in worksite intervention to prevent arthritis. The problem for both people and organizations is that they don't address an issue until it keeps them from doing what they want to do. It's important to focus on prevention. The VAN website should include a cross-link to MDH.

Next Steps on the VAN Website

Jan Hively said that a cross-disciplinary team has been meeting to address every aspect of the VAN website development process. Steve Wagner, the director of the Career and Lifework Center, and the College of Continuing Education Dean, Mary Nichols, have approved an actual and in-kind budget of \$65,000 this year and \$80,000 next year for developing and managing the website, and coordinating statewide outreach through VAN and Community Connectors. The process is due to generate a trial website about February, to **launch a full Phase 1 website at the Vital Aging Summit -- for which the date has now been set, March 26.** During the following year, Phase 2 will add a message board and other bells and whistles.

Jan reviewed the handouts, including the website layout and outline, and a description of the Network Resource Manager v1.0. The Resource Manager will be used by Information Collectors who are volunteers assigned responsibility for updating resources in one or more topic categories. There may be more than one Information Collector (IC) assigned to a specific topic category. All of the Phase 1 topic categories are shown in the website outline. The Information Collector's role is to identify and submit new information items, using the Resource Manager form for each item.

An IC will review information materials pertinent to the assigned category, such as newsletters, and submit pertinent information -- usually in the form of a descriptive paragraph with a link to a contact for further information.

Jan is seeking one or more Information Collectors for each topic and/or subtopics on the website outline that is attached. Please let Jan know (612-379-4124) if you

are interested in becoming an Information Collector, or suggest others who might be interested. The task of managing a top quality, up-to-date website will be easier with the more Information Collectors we have. This is an ideal volunteer task for a shut-in with some basic computer skills.

Right now, keep on sending your information items as attachments or in the body of an e-mail to <van@umn.edu>. Please show the number and title of the topic from the website outline, if possible.

Next Meeting

Mary Maher, a Ph.D. in Psychology and Educational Administration, will talk about "Leadership and Aging" at the October meeting. Hal Freshley will collaborate on the presentation.

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, October 9, from 10 to noon. The location will probably be the same as for the last three meetings -- the Red River Room in Snelling Office Park, on the northwest corner of Snelling Avenue and Energy Park Drive in St. Paul.

You will receive an agenda in the mail if you are on the listserv. Send an e-mail to <Hal.B.Freshley@state.mn.us> and ask to be placed on the listserv if you are not already there.