

**Summary, Vital Aging Network (VAN) Meeting, January 8, 2002
Luther Seminary, Northwestern Hall, 10 to noon**

Present

Kim Ballard, Thor Carlson, Eileen Collard, Diana Don Carlos, Nancy Edwards, Alice Evans, Hal Freshley, Leola Furman, Karen Greer, Chuck Gribble, Jon Groth, Susan Thurston Hamerski, Jan Hively, Beth Kessler, Barbara Laporte, Brian McCaffrey, M.J. McGregor, Ann Meissner, Sue Meyers, John Rafferty, Grace Ramseyer, Pat Samples, Barbara Satin, Ellen Sushak, Joanne Westergard

Introductions

The participants introduced themselves and their New Year Resolutions relevant to vital aging.

First time visitors included:

..Diana Don Carlos, who has just completed her graduate work at the U of M after working in long term care and is now looking for a job that focuses on vital aging within the field of long term care

..Nancy Edwards, faculty member at St. Cloud State, and Barbara Satin, representing an organization of GLBT elders, called "Generation." Their goal is to assure integration of GLBT perspectives in plans and programs for older adults.

..M.J. McGregor, a faculty member at St. Catherine's, who is working with the SAGE Scholars program at St. Kate's, presenting 3-6 hour courses for older adults.

..John Rafferty, a long-time social worker who teaches public policy at Metro State University

..Ellen Sushak, the Coordinator for Community Education statewide, based in the MN Dept of Children, Families and Learning. Ellen will bring materials about older adult education to the next VAN meeting.

Ann Meissner, "Gerotranscendence"

Ann Meissner is a practicing licensed psychologist and a founding partner of ElderZest. She has just been accepted into an 18-month institute program in Washington, D.C., focused on "personal and spiritual deepening."

Ann told us what she'd done on her summer vacation last year. With her daughter, Edie, she had traced the roots of her forebears in Sweden, and had also visited Lars Törnstram, a professor at Upsala University, who has coined the phrase "gerotranscendence." One can read his analysis in:

Törnstram, L. (1997). Gerotranscendence: The Contemplative Dimension of Aging. *Journal of Aging Studies*, vol. 11 2:143-164.

He can be reached at <Lars Törnstram @socuu.se

In his office, T̄rnstam has a drawing showing a flock of white sheep proceeding along to fall off a cliff, with a black sheep, saying "excuse me" turning back, away from the cliff, and away from the crowd. His work describes the progress of the black sheep. T̄rnstam completed a study of loneliness for his PhD dissertation. He found then that people declared less loneliness as they age, and has reinforced that finding with similar findings looking across the life span. The older you are, the less lonely you are. This finding contradicts the image of lonely old people sitting by themselves, needed a push to "go and join the rest of the group". It suggests that they may be happy thinking their own thoughts, doing what they wish in relation to social interaction.

He then conducted intensive interviews with 50 Swedish individuals ages 52 to 97. T̄rnstam's interviews generated his description of the three main dimensions of gerotranscendental change: the cosmic dimension, the self, and the social and personal relations dimension. These are the dimensions of true maturity that comes with age, and are unrelated to frailty or physical disability. You can get old and you can get smart; the two are not always connected. Some critics have said that these dimensions can't be generalized beyond the Swedes, because the Swedes are naturally stoic and don't have to worry about medical care. Yes, but....the relevance is broader. These are dimensions along which we change with age. Gerotranscendence is the goal.

Social and Individual Relationships. We are better able to differentiate between the roles that we play and our real selves as we grow older. It becomes important to pay attention to the difference. You can use your role. For example, Ann defines herself as the "Grandmother of the Western world." T̄rnstam talks about "emancipated innocence. The old social conventions no longer apply, and we see the kid in old person's clothes. We are more likely to own our own perceptions, whatever they are, rather than adopt the perceptions of others. We gradually understand the petrifying gravity of wealth and physical possessions. We get beyond "right and wrong", understanding the complexity and difficulty of distinguishing between the two. We gain everyday wisdom.

Self. There is a decrease in self-centeredness. We are part of the chain -- a highly prized link. Sometimes there is a shift from egotism to altruism. We are more likely to understand how our earlier altruism was encumbered by egotism. We rediscover our child within, and take the world less seriously.

Cosmic. Borders between the past and present are diminished. Your definition of life and death changes and you lose your fear of death. Life is like a jigsaw puzzle: you set out in one direction, something comes along, your direction changes, and the new piece fits. We accept small miracles -- the synchronicity of events. The scale of our sources of happiness goes from grand to micro. Ann moved from owning a home to a rental, and has shifted her thinking to being proud about "how much I got rid of today." On the other hand, the connections to earlier generations -- genealogy, etc. -- has become more important.

These are the facets of aging that Lars T̄rnstam and I value.

Discussion

- ..We begin to accept mistakes and acknowledge the mysteries.
- ..When I'm faced with behavior that doesn't fit my expectations, I now say, "What a piece of work!" and give up my own right and wrong dichotomies.
- ..When do people begin to demonstrate the changes of gerotranscendence?
- ..The work on "Brain and Behavior" shows that the pre-frontal cortex doesn't mature until you're in your 20s. That is where impulse becomes connected to common sense. When you are younger, you don't foresee the consequences of your behavior. The family must serve as a "brake" until then. The shift from seeing things as right or wrong starts to come, after the 20s.
- ..What about the thought that the older we get, the more we become like ourselves -- "who we really are."
- ..We do tend to care less about what others think, and know ourselves better in the process.
- ..My daughter says to me, "Mother! The neighbors are dead!"
- ..In retirement, we find out what there is here that is not part of my roles.
- ..Often, people have lost what they loved to do in the roles that they've played.
- ..We tend to get hooked into activities and roles that drain our energy, rather than into interaction and reconnection that energizes us.
- ..Our job is to bring wisdom back into society.
- ..Those of us who are GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) have had to set aside the traditional roles more than others.
- ..Yes, and life crises also push the change ahead.
- ..Through tragedy (the Grand Forks flood and death of my husband), I lost my sense of safety. That has been liberating, overall.
- ..The more that you do that brightens the light in your eyes, the better.
- ..The wake-up call for me came when I took a dress to Goodwill, and my daughter bought it!
- ..We project onto old people the fact that being alone is being lonely.
- ..Yes, after Lars has worked with the staff of a long term care facility, the staff members don't push people so hard to be sociable.
- ..There is "alone," "lonely," and "isolated"...very different descriptors.
- ..I feel most lonely in a crowd, when I don't have a companion in the midst of strangers or other people who are in couples.
- ..Is it important to keep the family's photo albums?
- ..Yes.... when your memory begins to fail, the visual images can stimulate connections. Take the time to write on the back of them.
- ..Also, include the background rather than use the zoom lens...so that people can see "what it was like then...."
- ..You can name your spiritual journey, or prepare an ethical will.
- ..That's the "testament" in "last will and testament."
- ..Our ideal self comes closer to our real self at the end.

Good Books

- ..We will compile a list of the good books mentioned in our meetings and show the list on the VAN web site.

..Robert Coles, "Moral Intelligence."
..Gary Kenyon, narrative gerontology, "Ordinary Wisdom"
..Charles Kempthorne. "Lifestory." He suggests family newsletters.
.."Who gets Grandma's Yellow Pie Plate?" is an Extension Service workbook for families to discuss "inheritance" and issues around estate planning.
..Rachel Freed has written about legacy...leaving a blessing
..James Hillman, "The Force of Character"

VAN Web Site Usability Test

Several volunteers met one-by-one with Kim Ballard, from the VAN Web site team, for a usability test on the designs for the home page and section pages.

VAN Summit and Regional Meetings

Jan Hively described the work being guided by planning groups to decide on a VAN logo, develop the Summit program agenda, design a program brochure, develop the graphics for the web site, and complete fundraising for the conference. Jan also described the plan for holding a community meeting in each of a dozen areas around the state, between January 29 and February 15. The purposes are to inform people about VAN, the Summit, and the web site. A packet of information is being prepared for each participant. The MN Board on Aging is helping with meeting contacts. Ideally, a few people from the area will attend the Summit and come back home with ideas that can be shared in a follow-up meeting.

To inform people about the Summit, Jan will soon send out a news release and e-mail version of the program brochure so that all of the VAN members can help by:

- 1) Attending the Summit, March 26
- 2) Circulating program information with a registration form to every relevant network.

Next VAN Programs

The group decided on the following topics for the next four meetings:

..The Meaning of Retirement
..Organizing around the issues of older GLBT adults
..Housing for vital aging
..Community Education

Brian McCaffrey will try to secure a Luther Seminary room for the four meetings. Hal and Jan will let you know about these timing of the individual topics.

Adjournment