

**Notes from October Vital Aging Network (VAN) Meeting  
10 a.m. to noon, Tuesday, October 8, 2002, Board Room, Luther Seminary**

**Present**

Dale Anderson, Carrie Bassett, Karen Bowen, Thor Carlson, William Cox, Carol Daly, Joan Davies, Diana Don Carlos, Nancy Edwards, Jerry L. Fagerland, Meridel Fahsl, Renee Fredericksen, Annie Glasgow, Connie Goldman, Karen Greer, Bob Gubrud, Susan Thurston Hamerski, Jan Hively (Recorder), Sherrie Holman, Linda Kirchmaier, Michael Kruchten, Patsy Kuentz, Barbara Laporte, Lindsey McDivitt, Sue Meyers, Barbara Muesing, Kris Orluck, Robert Pope, Pat Samples, Barbara Satin, Sue Schultz, Carol Segrave, Tricia Skajewski, Gloria Swanson, Connie Thompson, Mary O'Brien Tyrrell, Steve Wagner, Dolores Zeller

**Welcome and Introductions**

Jan Hively, Coordinator of the Vital Aging Network, convened the group. The participants introduced themselves and described their specific (varied and exciting!) interests related to vital aging. Approximately one-half of the participants were attending their first VAN meeting.

Connie Goldman spoke about her newly published book, *The Gifts of Caregiving: Stories of Hardship, Hope and Healing*, from Fairview Press. More than 30 family caregivers, including Rosalyn Carter, Studs Terkel, and Dana Reeve (wife of Christopher Reeve) share their stories. A CD of Connie's public radio program, "Hardship into Hope: The Rewards of Caregiving" is bound into the book.

Steve Wagner, director of the U of M Career and Lifework Center, who provides oversight for VAN, mentioned that the Question of the Month on the home page of the VAN Web site asks for your comments about the topic of the month, Wisdom. Go to <[www.van.umn.edu](http://www.van.umn.edu)> and plug in your response. Also, Steve reported that Ray Seth, a retired engineer and vital ager, has been hired on contract as the VAN Web Site Content Manager. He will organize the Information Collectors and assure Web site updates.

**WISDOM, with Caroline (Carrie) Bassett as Presenter and Discussion Leader**

Caroline Bassett, Ph.D., is the founder and director of The Wisdom Institute, and a faculty member at Walden University and Capella University. Carrie has been studying the topic of Wisdom for several years, with the goal of helping people move more intentionally toward wisdom in their organizations, communities, and lives. Her objectives for the session are to:

1. Help the VAN participants to get to know each other, and build community
2. Explore how to encourage elders to recognize and honor their wisdom and the wisdom of others

**Part 1. Small group exercise: "Knowing now what I do about life and getting older, here's what I would tell someone who is under 50."** In groups of five, the meeting participants were asked to write down a couple of individual responses, share them with

others in the small group, and report out a couple from each group. Here are some of the responses that were reported to the large group.

"I would tell that person under 50 to..."

- Live each day fully. Don't dwell on the past.
- Do what makes your heart sing.
- Take the time to get to know yourself.
- Identify your gifts and passions and let them bring purpose to your life.
- Be true to yourself and believe in yourself.
- Take more risks.
- Look at what you've gained and learned through the passing years.
- Be ready for the most open and freeing time of your life.
- Treasure each day. Believe in the future.
- Get to know people.
- Do what you can to stay healthy.
- Find balance. Don't try to do it all today.
- Be engaged.
- Live today -- Don't wait. Do it now.
- Spend time with those you love the most.
- Try hard to resist the pressures to stay young. See what now has to offer. Don't put off getting older.

**Part 2. Presentation: "What is Wisdom?"** Wisdom is big, complex, and abstract. To make it more approachable, Carrie used the visual image of a large tree. The roots nourish and stabilize the tree. The trunk holds it up. The branches reach out and expand its bearing capacity. The leaves provide energy. And the fruits and seeds are products to nourish others. Wisdom includes four major components:

1. Discernment is the cognitive dimension that allows us to see clearly what is really going on. It includes detachment, balanced judgment, and holistic seeing. It's the trunk of the tree.
2. Empathy is the affective dimension and includes compassion and respect -- caring. It fills the function of the leaves of the tree.
3. Engagement is the active dimension and includes taking responsibility for action as well as courage. "From what I see and feel, this is what I feel that I must do." It reaches out to get things done...like the branches of the tree.
4. Identity is the reflective dimension. There you will find self-knowledge, a measure of self-transcendence, and integrity. "Know thyself." This is the root of the tree. Elders have wonderful root systems.

With diagrams of trees, Carrie showed the importance of protecting the root zone from incursion. The drip line around a tree outlines the minimal area for the protected root zone. Often large trees continue to live with a number of dead branches. We all have dead branches in our lives.

Carrie has garnered her understandings about wisdom from reading -- psychology, philosophy, literature and the arts, religion and spirituality, and from interviews with a lot

of thoughtful, insightful people. It is important to think about wisdom as a process through which we apply complex intelligence to the human condition. Wisdom is the "faculty of making the best use of knowledge, experience, understanding, etc.; good judgment." (*Webster's Dictionary*) Caring is essential. As stated by the Dalai Lama, "Have a good heart."

Comments:

- It's important to give elders their "drip space" -- the time to think -- to live with their memories
- Sometimes trees don't have the root systems to hold themselves up. Exemplified by redwoods, they need to be in groves, where they can hold each other up.
- Knowing what you don't know is important.

**Part 3. Small and Large Group: Ideas about ways to encourage elders to recognize and honor their wisdom and the wisdom of others.** Carrie asked the small groups to each generate a couple of ideas for the large group to consider. These were some of the ideas that were generated:

- Right up to the last moment, we should provide people with the opportunity to talk deeply, and assure them that we will listen, with courtesy and respect.
- We should give people opportunities to deepen relationships with others, wherever they are located.
- We should be alert to our own wisdom -- provide feedback for each other -- and time for reflection.
- Talking about our own weaknesses is a good way to move to deep conversation with others.
- People need opportunities to share their wisdom with others. Good interviewing skills are essential for those who work with older adults so that they will ask appropriate questions and listen well to the responses.

General discussion:

- The stereotypes of aging act as major barriers. You can't celebrate your wisdom if you are told that you don't have it.
- People talk about the wisdom of elders, but not when the elders are right there in the room, where they are often treated like has beens.
- A couple of the VAN participants enjoy meeting with others regularly in a Wisdom Circle, where there is conscious sharing and reflection and feedback.
- We learn about ourselves by hearing others talk about themselves.
- We can express wisdom in other ways besides language. We need to draw on the whole person's wisdom....generated in our bodies as well as our minds.

Group members thanked Carrie for her presentation and for stimulating rich conversation.

### **Van Leadership Group**

Carol Daly reported about the recent work of the VAN Leadership Group -- a group of 18 self-nominated VAN members formed in July to maintain the integrity of VAN as a grassroots movement that promotes the sharing of strengths through education and

advocacy for and with older adults that will combat ageism, support the lifelong right to self-determination, and encourage the vital involvement of older adults in communities. Renee Fredericksen (research consultant with the Board on Aging) has been elected as chair, and Jan Hively as vice chair, to serve through December 2003. They will work closely together so as to function as "co-chairs", to take advantage of their complementary experience and qualifications. The VAN Leadership Group has approved a Procedural Framework that will be e-mailed to the VAN listserv.

**Next Meeting: Immigrant Elders**

The November 12 meeting will be in the same Board Room at Luther Seminary, with Vinodh (Vinnie) Kuddy, the Hennepin County coordinator of services for immigrant elders. Vinnie will talk about who are Minnesota's immigrant elders -- where they are from, what issues they face, what services and organizations are growing up to involve them.