



## VAN FORUM NOTES

### Connie Goldman on Late Life Love

Tuesday, November 14, 2006

**Edina Community Education Center**

5701 Normandale Road, Edina

Host Jan Hively opened the Forum by posing the following question to the group:

“In your own experience of getting older, what is one thing that you have found to be different from what you expected? “

Responses included:

- Modern medicine.
- I have more energy than I expected.
- Being widowed, I am surprised by the number of women who are single and willing to help me.
- I didn't like being 30, 40 or 50. At 60, I've decided that I'm going to have a good time.
- I have an active life with no medical problems. I thought retirement meant a sedentary life with health problems.
- That I'm still working at 68.
- Romance at 70.
- A few more careers
- I expected to be wiser; there are many opportunities yet to improve!
- Retirement has no meaning anymore. We are reinventing at all ages.
- I find the lines between ages are blurred. I like some of my children's music!
- Amazed at vitality.
- At 59, I'm surprised that my kids are still at home.
- I've taken on my 15 year old granddaughter. I'm healthier than my mom was.
- This is the most freedom I could ever imagine.
- I've had three knee replacements and two cancer operations and I'm still standing.
- If I knew I was going to live this long I would have taken better care of myself.
- Gratitude. I miss the feeling of being needed.

## **The Power of Stories**

In introducing Connie Goldman and her topic, Hively quoted Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Grey Panthers, commenting that “we are sexual beings all our lives.” She pointed out that this comment and Goldman’s stories contradict traditional ageist assumptions.

Goldman began by talking about the power of stories; she has been telling stories since her early days at National Public Radio (NPR). “We learn about ourselves through the stories of others,” she said. She believes that wisdom resides in everyone, but that we must “learn our wisdom through our growth.”

Goldman sees that the baby boomers still cling to culturally pervasive images of youthful sexuality. She wants to influence change so that we embrace the unique and special nature of each age, adding that “50 (years old) is different from 60, and 60 is not the same as 70.”

## **Broad Range of Late Life Love Experiences**

Researching her new book, *Late Life Love: Finding Romance and New Relationships in Later Years*, Goldman was surprised to find that the 22 couples she interviewed had worked out their lives in totally different ways, proving that there is no single blueprint to a successful relationship. The range of stories reflects the diversity of experiences and expectations at various ages and life situations.

Reading from her book, Goldman shared the stories of some of her couples. The first story addressed the choice to marry. Barbara and Steve were divorced from others and had vowed never to marry again. “I had been living in silence, under a lot of stress” Steve conceded. Goldman attended their wedding in August. Having worked out their family and financial problems they decided to marry, Goldman explained, because they thought that marriage could move their relationship to another level. Goldman emphasized that, while marriage is the way this couple chose to express their partnership, many couples choose to live outside of marriage, perhaps influenced by the example of younger people.

Goldman talked about the difference between physical closeness from sexual activity, pointing out that while people have a need for intimacy which can certainly include sex, the tenderness of physical closeness can also meet that need. Goldman quotes Dr. Robert Butler, regarding sex after 60 with his wife Myrna: “The first language of sex is primitive, biological, explosive, but the second language is closeness, touch.”

In the story of Louise and James, Louise had told Goldman that her first husband was not affectionate, and didn’t know much about physical closeness beyond satisfying his sexual desire. Now, Louise and her new partner share a mutually satisfying relationship, even though James is impotent. “He puts my needs first,” Goldman quoted Louise.

Sexual intimacy is different in late life, and there is a danger in thinking that you are inadequate if you're not the same type of sexual being that you once were. "I insist that we have sex in the dark" Goldman quotes one partner, to illustrate that ageism abounds, creating negative body perceptions that affect our physical relationships. Goldman blames messages conveyed through the mass media, citing a typical magazine article entitled "How to Stay Young and Sexy."

Independence in late life is usually considered an asset, but attachment to an independent way of life must be worked out in a late life relationship. The solution for some couples is to continue to live in separate homes. Real estate issues, inheritance issues, issues around children, can be worked out, Goldman insisted, if partners are willing to invent solutions that address their special circumstances.

Emphasizing the importance of self-acceptance, Goldman related the story of a woman who came to her new relationship with the determination that she was not willing to take on the role of full-time caretaker for a second time. Consequently, as her late-life partner's health declined, she made alternate arrangements for his care, coming to that decision "without guilt." Goldman highlighted the importance of accepting that "society's expectations aren't necessarily what yours will be."

Speaking of her own life, Goldman stated that she had not expected to find a late-life relationship. However, she is now sharing life with a partner. She suggested that accepting people as they are, instead of needing to change them, is "one of the wisdoms we learn."

In closing, Goldman quoted the poet Muriel Rukeyser, "the world isn't made up of atoms, it's made up of stories."

Note: *Late Life Love: Finding Romance and Relationships in Later Years*, by Connie Goldman, is published by Fairview Press (2006).