

## Building the Foundation for Fulfillment as We Age: Five Critical Building Blocks

By Ron Pevny

Let's be honest about aging. Most of us do and will suffer losses and diminishments of certain of our capacities as we age. Unfortunately, our culture in general has come to define our elder chapters by these losses and diminishments. This all-too-narrow understanding of aging relegates older adults to being seen primarily as needy, diminished beings who will likely require expensive care, while no longer having a relevant role to play in society as they live out the ever-increasing number of years after retirement age. And because it is so pervasive, most of us have internalized these beliefs, and they influence how we deal with our own aging and the aging of others.

But there is another side to this coin of aging, and this has become known as Conscious Aging. This understanding of aging focuses on our great potential for continuing emotional and spiritual growth in life's later chapters. It focuses less on what we want to do, or can no longer do, as we age and more on who we want to be. The old adage is true that wherever we go and whatever we do, there we are. Our elder chapters give us a precious opportunity to grow toward a personal wholeness which can infuse whatever we do and whatever we experience with joy, peace, meaning and service. This is a time in life that calls us to grow beyond who we have been into the person we have the potential to be. It calls us to do the inner exploration and inner work than can keep us alive and thriving in whatever circumstances life presents.

I'd like to share with you what I see as the key tenets of Conscious Aging—the critical foundation of a fulfilled, growthful elderhood. These can be summed up in five words: Belief; Baggage; Purpose; Community; and Spirituality.

### **Belief**

A recent study, well publicized in the press, confirmed what many of us have long known, and which lies at the heart of most of the world's spiritual and growth traditions. What we believe shapes who we become. Those who believe they can stay healthy, have fulfillment, enjoy meaningful relationships, and somehow serve

others in their elder years do indeed tend to stay healthy (living on average 7.5 years longer), feel more fulfilled, and do find ways to be of service, as contrasted with those who believe it's all a downhill slide after retirement. We all create lifestyles, make choices and carry attitudes that reflect and support our beliefs, and shape the way we age.

Throughout recorded human history, the role of elder was an honored role, with elders expected to contribute their wisdom and gifts in meaningful ways to their community. We don't live in such societies, and our culture reverses youth and newness and doesn't even recognize the role of elder. But the human psyche doesn't change just because our society doesn't see elders as relevant to its wellbeing. There is an elder in each of us that wants to emerge as we age; but we need to believe in our potential for personal growth, meaning and service or that potential may never see the light of day. We have to believe that it is possible for us to aim high, rather than just spending our later years in a holding pattern not aiming for much of anything, as seems to be the case with so many people.

## **Baggage**

Having a positive vision for our elder years is important, but we won't get very far with making it a reality if we are worn down with lots of emotional baggage accumulated throughout long lives. We all know many older adults who have lost motivation, joy, energy, passion—and it is often assumed that is the inevitable result of aging. While we all lose some physical energy as we age, Conscious Aging sees much of the loss of energy and motivation as being due to regrets, resentments, unprocessed grief, and old stories about our lives and worth that so many of us carry into our older years. We become beaten down by life, with little energy to engage with life and others and to thrive. There is great value in doing life review work to help us see both the strengths and gifts we can carry forward into our elder years, and those unprocessed drains on our energy that, with some effort, can be healed, freeing up much energy to support our aliveness as we age. And there are many fine resources to help us do this important inner work.

## **Purpose**

Leading researchers into healthy longevity around the world seem to be in agreement that a critical (perhaps THE most important) correlate of a long and healthy life is purpose; having a reason to get up in the morning that provides

meaning for oneself and is bigger than oneself. I find it a sad fact that so many people in today's world feel that whatever legacy they will leave has been created by the time they reach retirement age. Many believe that, after working hard all their lives, they deserve to live just for themselves in their final chapters. With many people living 20 or 30 years after retirement age, that's a lot of time to live just for oneself. One of the tasks of aging consciously is finding purpose and continuing to create a legacy of service for as long as we live.

## Community

All the studies on aging well say that having healthy relationships is crucial to wellbeing. Those I know who are models of aging well have such relationships, and it's not just about having a bunch of people in your life. It's about having people with whom you can share what is truly meaningful to you, what matters to you—your doubts and fears, your joys and visions for the future—knowing that these others really care about you and you care about them. It's about having people in your life who bring out the best in you, rather than draining your energy and optimism. This is critical so that we have the support we all need to embrace and live a positive vision for our aging. Finding community as we age can be difficult and take us out of our comfort zone, but the results can be life-enhancing, and even life saving.

## Spirituality

As we age, most of us experience an inner call, sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic, to deepen our relationship with the spiritual dimension of life and of ourselves. Issues of meaning, of the value of our lives and of our contributions, of our relationship to something greater than our personality selves call to be attended to. This is a very individual process, and it is the responsibility of those committed to aging consciously to find the path to spiritual deepening that is best able to open their hearts and minds. It is this spiritual connection that is the source of healing of the past and vision for a future of true fulfillment. It is the necessary foundation of wholeness.

**Ron Pevny** is Founding Director of the Center for Conscious Eldering He is also a Certified Sage-ing® Leader, is author of *Conscious Living, Conscious Aging*

published by Beyond Words/Atria Books, and serves as the host/interviewer for the Transforming Aging Summits presented by The Shift Network.