

Liberating Imagination about Aging 2002 Perth, Australia
International Federation on Aging Global Conference by Bliss W. Browne

We are in the midst of a positive aging revolution and a revolution in the workplace as well. We've been given a whole extra generation of life to use in a new way. How shall we take advantage of this gift of nature to evolve the human species? Might the purpose of increased longevity be to mature enough to express our untapped potential for building a new and better world?

When I was 13, an inspired ancient history teacher asked us to spend a month designing an imaginary continent and writing its history. We had to decide who lived there and how they got along. We had to imagine how the continent was settled, how conflicts were resolved, how people created meaning, order, and purpose in community through governance structures and religion, how they organized commerce, what and how they spoke to one another. In short, we had to understand, imagine and create the human enterprise in a place. All of this was brought to life through a set of colored maps we created which showed how the continent changed over time. It was a powerful and invigorating activity.

I wonder what mythical maps about "The Land of Positive Aging" govern our government's policies, our own hopes and fears, how we look in the mirror, how we produce goods and services? Think of how you draw the maps of aging... What images have authority in you? What do you love and fear about it? How have your images of aging changed over time?

When I was five, "the Land of the Old" was defined by stories and storytellers, musty like my music teacher's home which was full of hard couches and soft pussy willows. It was full of people like my grandmother and babysitter who wore hair nets and liked things a certain way and shuddered when I climbed the tree in our front yard. At age twenty, reading TS Eliot's *Four Quartets* expanded my aging map—in his poetic landscape, aging swarmed with the mystery of life, and was subject to sudden storms and long droughts and unexpected insights. It was a land where life lost its illusions and plunged into paradox, a land of clear seeing followed by dust storms and waiting in which no way forward could be discerned. More recently, working in low-income communities in Chicago, I have come to recognize aging as no longer a land separated from youth; by necessity and hardship, many grandmothers and grandfathers are raising a second generation of children because the middle generation has been lost to drugs or other premature death. Grandparents and great grandparents are now prayer warriors and crime stoppers, who sit in their rocking chairs and watch vigilantly out of their front windows for trouble, protecting neighborhoods with their prayers, eyes and ears, attentive to forces that threaten the peace and security of the community, calling police before danger gains a foothold.

Much of our discourse and media commentary about the extra generation of life has been trapped in disparaging ageism. Biology and economics anchor our basic Western model; we are more in the habit of consuming images than of creating them. Many of the images of age we have been fed are of the Land of the Old as overpopulated and full of unproductive people afflicted with inescapable physical and mental handicaps.

As Yogi Berra said, “the Future isn’t what it once was,” but it can be full of life and purpose. We have a whole new generation of life to live. How do we keep ourselves awake to the possibilities of our lives as we age so the future and not only the past stay on our mental map?

One way is to look for examples of lives that have successfully claimed aging’s discovery and promise. They abound in my immediate family so I will use them as vivid examples of a new era in aging which has been underrepresented. My father is 92. For forty years, he worked for the same company until mandatory retirement age, which he reached thirty years ago. Since then he has developed three major new careers, the latter in China, in both a new country and new field for him. Last year he flew from Chicago to China four times to help my younger brother with a new concrete block business they started there 7 or 8 years ago. When asked why he created such a time consuming and high-risk venture abroad so late in life, he says it’s fascinating and he hopes it will benefit his great grandchildren, as yet unborn. He often introduces my mother, to whom he has been married for 59 years, as his “current wife.” Last year at his 90th birthday party, Daddy looked around the room at many admiring children, grandchildren and friends, smiled and said, “I can’t tell you what a comfort it is to me to be here.” The next day, he spent the afternoon responding to questions about life put to him by his family, with familiar lightheartedness. His 13 grandchildren hung on every word.

My 91 year old father-in-law lived a conventional life in the suburbs for many years. Twenty years ago when he retired, he and his wife moved to Key West, Florida, a colorful island community. My mother-in-law became increasingly frail and chose to spend most of her time at home in quiet pursuits. My father-in-law wanted to get exercise and began to attend a small gym. Someone there invited him to a Tae Kwon Do class. After several years of practice, and gradual progress, he determined to get his black belt. I was present, as were several of his grandchildren, the day he had his exam at age 80. I held my breath as he split boards with his hands and feet, waiting for the crunch of bones. The boards split but he didn’t. His grandsons watched in amazement. And I began to wonder what new strenuous physical activity I might try in my ninth decade of life?

My mother is 12 years younger than my father, and turned 80 this year. She has spent most of her life as a homemaker, dedicated to her husband and 5 children. WWII precluded her finishing college and she never had a career outside the home though she has long been active as a volunteer and friend. My siblings and I used to wish she would find something that was truly hers to do, and worry about whether she might become too invested in our lives if she outlived my father by many years. About fifteen years ago, she took up painting for the first time. She took lessons regularly, and set aside a studio for her work. She began to paint portraits of her grandchildren, of the beach near her home, as well as of gardens around the world. She discovered and developed what proved to be an enormous talent as an artist. Last year, she had one woman shows in both Chicago and Palm Beach with about 40 of her oil paintings.

To understand my parents’ aging, it would seem odd to tell stories about geriatric physiology instead of stories about creativity and learning and risk taking. My parents represent, what in some circles is called “successful aging”, the ability to maintain

optimal well-being in the face of age-associated losses. My mother has transformed aging into an art form, by her creative expression as a painter and by her singular enthusiasm for life. My father continues to make the choices he has always made—active learning, high challenge and active care for future generations. Gimp knees at 91 are an expected nuisance, not an identity. My parents' considerable gift to their children is that aging is something we all welcome every day, wrinkles and all, a certain sign of the persistence of life over death.

In a vital intergenerational learning community, where life flourishes at every age, it is possible to develop an exalted view of aging and its possibilities. Unfortunately, for many people both young and old in the city of Chicago where I live, life is lost prematurely to isolation, despair, violence and addiction. We have institutionalized divisions of race, class, sector, culture, and economic means into political structures, mindsets, and housing patterns. As a person of faith, I know there is an alternative imagination in which everyone has a place at the table, a share of what's on the table, and is willing to be put under obligation. It would be unconscionable to run out of communion bread halfway through a Sunday service, or to serve it only to "important" or productive people. What will it take for us to assume more broadly that there is "bread enough for all?"

Ten years ago, I organized a conference on "Faith, Imagination and Public Life", gathering in lots of well-known Chicago justice pioneers and social innovators. I wanted to understand the imagination that had shaped Chicago over the last century - and stimulate a broad group of civic entrepreneurs to re-imagine Chicago as a whole. People introduced themselves by describing an image that had particular authority in their lives. By the second day, people were willing to dream, to describe images of Chicago's future ultimately worthy of human commitment. The image that came to me was of the recycling symbol, not just as an image of ecology, but as a representation of God's economy, in which nothing and no one is wasted. I began to imagine a city...

- where everyone is valued.
- where every citizen, young and old, applies their talents to create a positive future for themselves and their community.
- where hope comes alive in the flourishing and connecting of human lives.
- where young people and others whose visions have been discounted, develop and contribute their ideas and energy.

Within three days, I set aside a 16-year corporate career to begin the work of discovering ways to bring the vision to life, in an initiative which became known as Imagine Chicago. Full inclusion of both the young and the old, as two especially vulnerable populations, was a vital priority, as an urgent matter of social justice. (Ronald Marstin defines justice as fundamentally a matter of who is included and whom we can tolerate neglecting.) Expanding our collective creativity and innovation also depends on broader inclusion. Many technological innovations—the typewriter, telephone, transistor, computer, email were originally developed to compensate for physical limitations like blindness, hearing and speech loss. Moving toward full inclusion of the elderly not only liberates our largest inventory of stories of what has been possible, and helps create a more just society, it also expands our collective capacity for wisdom and innovation. As we celebrate life matters, and expand our circle of who matters, what we are able to do and understand grows.

Imagine Chicago's first initiative was a citywide interview process involving approximately 50 young people who interviewed about 150 older people, recognized by members of Imagine Chicago's design team as "Chicago glue". The young people asked about highlights of their lives as citizens, what they had been able to create, what they had experienced as effective processes for the city to work together. Conversation with the old stretched their view of the human enterprise, their imagination about what possible by bringing the best of the past into dialogue with the energy and commitment of the future.

One pair that met in this process were Gertrude Nielsen and Tim Wilborn. Gertrude was 96, a mentally alert and astute widow, interested in building strong connections to the next generation, and to life outside her experience. Each year, she celebrated her birthday in the company of 3 year olds at a day care center she established. Tim was 14, black, living in the worst public housing in Chicago. Both were looking for ways to make a difference. Tim asked to interview her after he met her at a luncheon: "She's been everywhere and thinks Chicago is the best city in the world. I wanted to hear more." Gertrude was a neighbor of our family. I recognized how vigorously she thought about the future and not only the past, that she sought to be alive as possible every day, to keep her mind and spirit active and challenged. Her grandmother, who must have been born in the early 19th century had told her at the age of five, "Do something every day to help someone." And so she did. She became Imagine Chicago's first benefactor. She also recognized in Tim a kindred spirit, someone willing to struggle and stretch, work hard and learn, value life and contribute to others. She offered to pay his way to university. They became good friends. He graduated from university, several years after Gertrude died just shy of her 101st birthday. This past summer, he helped launch Imagine Serbia.

The flowering of this friendship shows that it is possible to create exceptional relationships that avoid the stereotypes, judgments, defensiveness, fear and a priori decisions about who counts. To do so, in my experience, requires attention to constructive communication. Three dimensions are especially worth noting.

First is the power of **positive framing**. Human beings of any age are full of potential, rich in strengths and talents, with energy and vitality to dream and create. Even complaints mask a deep desire for change. Conversations therefore do not need to be about what our problems or needs are, but about how we can harness our capacities to make our lives and communities more vital. Stating affirmatively what we value, what we hope, what we want, enables us (as well as others) to understand and act on behalf of that vision. Reframing negative comments into positive desires can provide a way out of traps and into possibilities.

Second, conversations are invigorated by the power of *inspiring questions*. We can investigate anything — trouble or joy. The questions we ask set the agenda and determine what we find. Honest, open questions, asked in a spirit of friendship and genuine interest, enrich and deepen dialogue. They can clarify confusions and open up new images and understandings. Questions invigorate the imagination and stimulate learning and shared understanding. At a time in which the answers in hand are not sufficient for the challenges at hand, asking good questions becomes even more urgent.

The third generative power is *active listening*. Genuine dialogue is creative; something new happens in the "in-between" space that listening creates. When people listen deeply to one another, they honor each other and cultivate the trust and relationships so crucial for community to be created. They start not only to see, but also to 'hear' the possibilities for their collective future.

All over the world, communities are struggling to name what they value and to organize partnerships through which those values can be lived. Partnerships require understanding and acknowledging that we don't have all the answers ourselves, that we are all vulnerable, that we need and depend upon one another. What will develop confidence that by working together, acknowledging our common vulnerability, we can accomplish a greater good? One way is for us to experience inspiring and productive conversations with uncommon partners that expand what's possible for our lives. In such encounters of constructive difference, we discover that our learning communities are much bigger than we thought—that the stranger can become a friend.

There is one more highly valuable dimension of aging which provides exceptional opportunity – perhaps even more than extending productive capacity or expanding intergenerational connections. Aging offers an invitation to become more conscious, more fully awake to life's possibilities and mysteries, to deepen our spiritual capacity. The invitation often arises out of circumstances we might not choose. Recently, a 70 year-old neighbor, who has maintained a very active lifestyle, though she has MS, began to experience intense shooting pains in her legs. She tried everything she knew and her doctors recommended: exercise, diet, medication, massage trying to relieve the symptoms --without avail. She began having to cut back on most of her public activities and found herself falling into a depression. I stopped by to visit her and she said to me," All my life I have done things, I have been reliable. People count on me. Life has felt under control. But now I can't do that. It's driving me crazy. I know what I need to do now is to go inside, discover something about the inner life. But that's going to be really hard. I don't know how to do that...just to **be** instead of **doing** things. It makes me uncomfortable for others to do things for me, even though they are glad to. Letting go, and going inside, is going to be the hardest thing I've ever had to DO."

"Just when you think you see the whole picture of life clearly, the channel changes." To be fully awake to life's possibilities, we must be open to be shaped and stretched by the mystery within us as well as around us. As we age, we can examine and probe the patterns of our lives, allow ourselves to welcome and not rail against life's mystery, however disconcerting to our established and more limited paradigms which help us maintain an illusion of control. Once we step out of the utter busyness which consumes much of our time, and out of the roles which assure our identity is valued by others, we have the chance to wrestle with life and meaning on our own terms. That requires courage and curiosity.

An eloquent hymn to conscious aging which captures this wonderfully is TS Eliot's *Four Quartets* in which this inner struggle is described "at the still point of the turning world" :

Except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance and there is only the dance.

*...the inner freedom from the practical desire
the release from action and suffering,
release from the inner and outer compulsion,
yet surrounded by a grace of sense, a white light still and moving...
both a new world and the old made explicit... ”*

*Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy
In order to arrive at what you do not know,
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess, you must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not,
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not...
As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated of dead and living...*

Eliot concludes East Coker with the words, “In my end is my beginning,” exhorting “old men to be explorers, still and still moving into another intensity, for a further union, a deeper communion, through the dark cold and empty desolation...”

Why is this good news? Because we are not fundamentally consumers or bodies but living beings who make meaning, who search for value and a sense of purpose and connection to something bigger than ourselves, who need not only to explain but to try and understand our lives. When we step back from the world’s whirling for a time, the silence can speak to us if we let it, leading us to a larger truth, helping us see our lives in a deeper way.

Liberating imagination about aging involves liberating imagination about living. As we learn, live passionately, take risks, welcome life’s mystery, the community to which we belong and from which we draw courage grows, as does our courage to ask and live challenging questions. Welcoming all of life in its richness is a bold act, an act which establishes the dominion of life over death in a world in which that is becoming an urgent act of hope.

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