

AGING HORIZONS BULLETIN

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Interview: Alaskan Native Elders Share the Secrets of Successful Aging

Our culture shapes the way we age, yet few studies have looked at the impact of culture on our views of successful aging.

Dr. Jordan Lewis, a research associate with the Center for Alaska Native Health Research at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, has examined the impact of culture on aging, in rural communities in southwestern Alaska.

The study discovered that Alaskan Native Elders equated successful aging with achieving the status of Elder in the community.

The research was reported online in The Gerontologist (Feb. 28, 2011).

To learn more, AHB tracked Dr. Lewis down in Fairbanks, Alaska

Ruth Dempsey: So what is life like in rural Alaska? And what are some of your memories of growing up there?

Jordan Lewis: The study took place in Bristol Bay. This is the southwestern region of Alaska on the Alaska Peninsula. These are primarily commercial fishing communities and are home to three cultural groups: Aleuts, Athabascans and Yup'ik Eskimos.

Bristol Bay is a culturally diverse region. It touts the largest red salmon harvest in the world. This region is rich in history and continues to prosper.

The Native peoples carry on traditional subsistence lifestyles, participating in the commercial fishing industry and living off the land and sea. Many of the elders and residents continue to fish, hunt and trap. They pick berries and plants.

This region of Alaska is not on the road system, so these communities are only accessible by air or boat in the summer months.

I grew up in a family of commercial fishermen. I remember fishing during the summer months. There were lots of fish to pick out of the nets and late nights on the beach. I spent a lot of time playing outside with my cousins. During the summer, we also picked berries and smoked fish for the winter.

My fondest memories are of visiting with my great grandparents and other relatives and elders in the community.

RD: Your research focused on community Elders . . .

JL: That's right. In this study, the term "elder" is capitalized to differentiate between the indigenous elders of Alaska and those who are just considered elderly. This is a cultural convention that distinguishes those elders who have lived traditionally and continue to serve as an integral part of the community. These individuals are viewed as role models.

RD: How would you describe the participants?

JL: The 26 Alaskan Native Elders came from one of six villages in the Bristol Bay region. They were Aleut, Athabascan or Yup'ik Eskimo. They ranged in age from 61 to 93 years.

More than half lived independently with their spouses or partners. A majority of the widowed women lived with their extended family. The average household size was four.

The Elders living in assisted-living facilities in the region's hub community were less enthusiastic about the study and less willing to participate in the interviews. They felt they were not aging as well as those who were independent or living with family members.

RD: These older people equate successful aging with becoming an Elder . . .

JL: That's right. In fact, the study uncovered four elements that Alaskan Native Elders consider important for Eldership.

RD: So let's take a look at the elements. One is emotional well-being.

JL: Elders talked about the importance of a positive outlook. They focused on the need to remain optimistic in times of change or when faced with personal challenges, such as coping with chronic illness or limited mobility.

They also stressed the need for emotional balance and control. Elders explained:

- the danger of allowing mistakes and damaged relationships to stay bottled up inside;
- the need to forgive; and
- to move forward.

Participants valued their relationships. They believed that strengthening bonds with family and community created harmony and enhanced community health.

RD: Another element is community engagement.

JL: The study found that opportunities for involvement gave Elders a sense of purpose and a recognized role in the community.

The Elders saw this as a reciprocal relationship. A few of the participants discussed the changing role of Elders in villages once the Western form of government was introduced. The tribal chiefs, for example, were replaced with tribal council members, such as presidents and vice presidents.

Today Elder councils exist in villages throughout Bristol Bay. Participants were grateful for this level of inclusion in community life.

The psychologist Erik Erikson called the desire to further the well-being of future generations “generativity.” Almost every Elder discussed the importance of passing down their knowledge to the young. They talked about:

- reading stories to students in schools;
- teaching traditional hunting skills and subsistence practices;
- tutoring students in their history and culture; and
- teaching Native languages.

The Elders also expressed interest in having community centres across Bristol Bay, where old and young could meet, share their skills and stories and access medical personnel.

RD: Spirituality is a third element of Eldership . . .

JL: That’s right. Spirituality, or religion, played a significant role in the health and well-being of these Elders.

Church attendance was more prevalent among the Aleut communities where the presence of the Russian Orthodox Church was more strongly felt.

“You know that the old people, who are religious, keep going to church until they can’t make it anymore,” one participant told us. “The ones I’ve seen were into their 90s, who were still going to church.”

Attending church was one way for the Elders to socialize and be active in their community. However, their definition of spirituality was not confined to church attendance. Most Elders said they lived their spirituality throughout the day, praying for family and community, and weaving their traditional beliefs with church practice.

Yet, it is important to note that spirituality does not ensure successful aging.

RD: The final characteristic of Eldership is physical health . . .

JL: For these Elders, physical health is about eating a traditional diet, being as active as they are able and abstaining from drugs and alcohol.

But even participants with poor physical health viewed themselves as aging well.

“It’s just the attitude of that person,” one Elder remarked. “Being positive is number one for aging well. Positive and active.”

RD: These older people offer a different “take” on successful aging. It is more holistic.

JL: This is not surprising because much of the literature on successful aging is based on a biomedical model and rooted in a western perspective, which does not include the views of Indigenous Elders.

Among Alaskan Native cultural groups, the concept of health and well-being is holistic, involving all aspects of an individual. As one 73-year old male participant put it, “Aging [is] where you feel good about yourself. You’ve completed the circle, back to the drum handle.”

RD: What did you learn from the study?

JL: For one thing, the study has deepened my understanding of the diversity that exists in the field of successful aging. And it highlighted the importance of understanding aging from the perspective of older adults themselves.

In a nutshell, the participants equated successful aging with becoming an Elder and achieving a respected role in the community.

And they identified four characteristics of Eldership:

- emotional balance;
- community engagement;
- spirituality; and
- physical health.

RD: So what's next?

JL: From here, we need more research to determine the amount and type of services needed to support growing numbers of Alaskan Native elders in the region.

Meanwhile, I am working on a program to help improve the well-being of Alaskan Native elders, who have moved to long-term care facilities in urban settings, such as Anchorage.

New Book: Beyond Midlife: the Story is Changing

As tens of millions of people in North America move beyond midlife, expectations are changing.

Author Marc Freedman argues the “old map of life”, which guided us for generations, is out-dated. In his new book, *The Big Shift: Navigating the New Stage Beyond Midlife* (Public Affairs), he invites us to think of people in their 60s and 70s as explorers of the uncharted territory beyond midlife and before true old age. Freedman calls this new life stage the “encore stage.”

“The surge of people moving into this new stage of life is one of the most important social phenomena of the new century,” Freedman writes. “Never before have so many people had so much experience and the time and the capacity to do something significant with it.”

Aging, as possibility

Freedman admits much about the new life phase remains unclear, but work is emerging as a defining feature. Surveys by Civic Ventures and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) show a majority of Americans approaching retirement want to continue working full-time or part-time past traditional retirement age.

And among those who plan to continue working, many are looking for work that makes a difference in the world. A survey by AARP found that boomers rank teaching, nursing and childcare in the top 10 most popular post-retirement occupations.

Encore life stage

In *The Big Shift*, Freedman calls for social and cultural change to tackle:

- the impact of growing lifespans; and
- retirements spanning two or three decades.

Freedman argues for a stage of life beyond midlife that is characterized by “purpose, contribution and commitment, particularly to the well-being of future generations.”

Freedman explains the idea of a new developmental life stage is not new. Granville Stanley Hall, the turn-of-the-century psychologist and writer, first identified a post-retirement phase in the 1920s. He described the new stage in *Senescence: The Last Half of Life*.

In the late 1980s, demographic historian Peter Laslett heralded a new period between the middle years and old age that he called the “third age.” He set out his manifesto for third agers in *A Fresh Map of Life*.

New pioneers

In one of *The Big Shift*'s most striking sections, the author recounts stories of how the encore stage has worked for “a new group of pioneers.”

The pioneers include:

- a cook, who became an elementary school teacher;
- an engineer, who went back to school to become a social media manager for a seniors' organization; and
- a fundraiser for Boston's main public television station, who became a park ranger working on environmental issues in Yellowstone National Park.

Call to action

With nearly 8,000 people turning 60 every day in the United States, Freedman says it is time to put new social structures in place to harness the potential of this powerful demographic shift. He proposes a 10-point plan to help people navigate their way in a new map of life.

His call to action includes:

Elevate encore careers: Freedman has spearheaded the encore-jobs movement; he founded an educational non-profit group called Civic Ventures, of which he is CEO. In the book, he calls for new policies to make it easier for more people to find encore careers including training programs, opportunities to upgrade skills and flextime to care for aging parents.

Establish Individual Purpose Accounts: “Individual Purpose Accounts” are savings vehicles similar to tax-free health or college savings accounts that allow older adults to save for their own encore career transitions including a grown-up gap year.

Changes to security: Make social security payouts flexible, so individuals could use them to subsidize a renewal period, and stop them as they return to the workforce.

Adult education: Create programs to support development in the later years that blend vocational preparation, personal transformation and intellectual stimulation.

With verve and passion, Freedman ends *The Big Shift* with a 20-question discussion guide to help readers spark conversations among friends and colleagues.

Interview: Tai Chi: a Healing Art

“The research is demonstrating what the Chinese have known for centuries,” says gerontologist Gary Kenyon. “Tai Chi practice is beneficial for virtually all systems of the body.”

In Storying Later Life (Oxford University Press), Kenyon explores Tai Chi as both a healing art and form of narrative care.

Kenyon’s article is one of 22 chapters in a new collection (co-edited with Ernst Bohlmeijer and William Randall) that reflects new directions in the field of aging. This collection stresses the biographical side of human life is every bit as critical to fathom as the biological side. Put another way, “Our story may be the most precious possession we all have, especially the older we grow.”

A leading scholar, Dr. Kenyon is founding chair and professor in the gerontology department at St. Thomas University in Fredericton (New Brunswick, Canada). And a co-creator of the field of narrative gerontology and the concept of narrative care.

AHB reached him in Fredericton.

Ruth Dempsey: So what led you to Tai Chi?

Gary Kenyon: Originally curiosity led me to the martial arts, first karate. I had a special teacher who got me going and then I continued from there to Tai Chi with another teacher. This was the time of Bruce Lee and his movies and that influenced me as well. But later, the meditation and health aspects of Tai Chi became integrated with my career as a gerontologist.

RD: Tai Chi is a healing art ...

GK: That's right. Increasingly, the research is demonstrating what the Chinese have known for centuries: that Tai Chi practice is beneficial for virtually all systems of the body.

It is helpful in dealing with psychological and emotional issues such as addiction, anxiety and grief.

And Tai Chi is a purposeful activity and, thus, has meaning for the practitioner. This can be called a spiritual benefit.

RD: And Tai Chi is a “form of moving meditation.” How so?

GK: Tai Chi talks about “movement in stillness and stillness in movement”. The idea is that when performed correctly the Tai Chi practitioner feels peaceful and quiet even when doing the movements. It is good for those of us who may have difficulty sitting still to meditate.

RD: You have been a practitioner for three decades. What difference has Tai Chi made in your life?

GK: It is not a quick fix, but over time, it has helped me to give up some control and become more accepting. As a result, I deal better with stressful experiences in life. It also keeps me in shape physically.

I enjoy the camaraderie with my Tai Chi friends. I also enjoy the fact that learning and teaching Tai Chi is a never-ending process. Psychologically, it helps me to focus my mind and get things done faster and with less distraction.

And it promotes what I call “many moments of peace”.

RD: You work with older adults in the community. What are the benefits of Tai Chi for older people?

GK: Anyone can practice Tai Chi. It can be adapted to any level of ability. I teach classes with fit younger or older persons and also to residents in nursing homes. I have several students who are very close to being centenarians.

Tai Chi can help with most health challenges – from heart conditions to osteoporosis, sleep, hypertension and many others.

It is also an opportunity to meet socially, and, as there is no competition, it is relaxing in that way and can help with loneliness.

As I mentioned early on, Tai Chi is a meaningful activity and can give an older adult a sense of purpose.

Finally, it promotes feelings of well-being and peace.

RD: You say Tai Chi is a form of “narrative care”. What is narrative care?

GK: Narrative care is an approach to care that arises from what we call a wisdom environment. A wisdom environment is one that is based on storytelling and storylistening.

Think of it as a care setting in which the unique life story – that is what is meaningful to that person – is really listened to, and care is based on that story.

Tai Chi, as narrative care, means that the class is designed in a way that is respectful of the abilities and challenges of each participant.

In this case, narrative care also involves helping each participant to connect with the silence in the centre of each of our lifestories. In my experience, this can help even a dementia survivor to find moments of peace.

RD: In the book, you explore the possibilities of narrative care for our health care system. How would this work? Can you give me an example?

GK: A health care system based on narrative care would put the person at the centre of the clinical setting. In other words, the system would be set up in a way that is sensitive to the physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs of the person.

As we know from geriatric medicine, these needs – particularly as we grow older – are often interconnected. A person may visit an emergency unit at a hospital, but he or she really only needs to “talk to someone”. If this intervention were readily available, it would help the patient and save the system money.

A more simple example is to move away from common phrases such as “what do you expect at your age” and “how are we today dear”, and to actually be present to the person and their story.

Narrative care creates a space in which the patient’s voice can be expressed.

It is low-tech and very inexpensive. Mainly, it involves cultivating a certain attitude, or way of being, in all the stakeholders.

RD: Are there any programs in Canada, or elsewhere?

GK: Yes, there are a number of excellent examples of narrative care. In Canada, I would recommend, in particular, programs at the [York Care Center](#) in Fredericton.

There are other examples, not limited to long term care, in the Netherlands. These can all be found in *Storying Later Life*.

I also offer workshops on the topic. You can get the details at CreateSecondChances.com.

AHB Dispatches: Crazy for Music

In this issue, we bring you a poem by Rosaleen Leslie Dickson of Ottawa for our semi-regular feature, AHB Dispatches.

The veteran journalist and trailblazer, who will be celebrating her 90th birthday on July 2, 2011 writes: "It is a poem that wrote itself on my [website](#) when I was preparing for a birthday party. As I read it, two of my daughters hummed the tune My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean and another daughter played the violin. The whole family – 35 progeny plus spouses – joined in."

Interim Solution, with One Caveat

Life is a perpetual challenge,
Engaging us all as we age.
It's full of confusing instructions,
With new problems at every stage.
As soon as we're born we must figure
The methods required to get
Whatever we need from our mother or father,
Whenever we're hungry, or wet.

When we grow older our problems grow too,
Sharing with sisters and brothers.
Then, going to school, we must learn the new rule about
"Getting along with others."
When we're adult, we think it's all done,
With no more big problems to meet.
'Til we discover how tricky it is,
Just trying to stay on our feet.

"Oh, well," we tell ourselves, "All this will end.
When we grow old, we'll relax."
Then we are suddenly seventy-five.
That's when we learn the true facts.
However you dreamed of your future,
It may not turn out that way.
No day can be taken for granted;
Each one is like no other day.

I still have some projects to finish,
Many new places to go,
Books to be read, books to be written,

And new folks I still need to know.
Some of my plans unaccomplished,
I still have some poems to pen.
To get this all done, my only solution is,
"Live to a hundred and ten."

Then, quoting James Joyce, in Ulysses,
Writing, in his fashion, . . .
I will "pass boldly to that other world,
In the full glory of some passion."
Yes, I will go up to heaven.
One caveat only I hold:
There must be music up there, or I'll stay
Here forever, and never grow old.

ROUNDUP

IRELAND CALLING: If you have Irish ancestors, you may in for a surprise. Thanks to the [Ireland Reaching Out](#) project, it's just possible your Irish relatives may come looking for you.

This grassroots project was launched in 2010 to reconnect the Irish diaspora – an estimated 60 to 70 million worldwide. It is based on a simple idea: volunteers from each parish identify those who have left the area, and then they track their descendents worldwide.

Ireland Reaching Out is supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs. It is the brainchild of Loughrea-based entrepreneur Mike Feerick. The inaugural event for those who can trace their roots to southeast Galway was launched in June.

The program is set to expand nationally in the coming months with each parish in Ireland holding their own gathering every year.

GROWING OLD IN A CHANGING CLIMATE: In a recent report, *The Lancet*, a leading medical journal, and researchers at University College London warned climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century.

The report, *Managing the Health Effects of Climate Change*, focused on six key areas:

- patterns of disease and mortality;
- food security;
- water and sanitation;
- shelter and human settlements;
- extreme events; and
- population migration.

Lead author Anthony Costello said, “Apart from a small dedicated band of researchers, I think the health lobby has come late to this debate, but there’s much that we can do to protect billions of people now and in the future.”

Meanwhile, in Vancouver, health professionals, climatologists and community planners met recently to examine the affects of climate change on our aging population. They gathered at Simon Fraser University in May for the 20th annual John K. Friesen Conference: Growing Old in a Changing Climate: Exploring the Interface Between Population Aging and Global Warming.

“The conference sought to raise awareness of the connection between aging and climate change and identify where research, resources, and action are most needed,” said the organizers, Andrew Sixsmith of SFU’s Gerontology Research Centre (GRC) and Heather Stewart of GRC and the UBC Brain Research Centre.

Source: Straight.com

MUSIC IN THE PARK: Going to concerts, watching plays or visiting museums is good for men’s health and happiness, according to a new study.

Researchers at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology analyzed the results of a population-based health study, including 50,797 adults. Participants were asked how often they went to concerts, films, church, art exhibitions or sport’s events, as well as how often they participated in club meetings, sang, danced, played a musical instrument or took part in outdoor activities.

In addition, they were asked how healthy they felt, how satisfied they were with life in general and if they felt depressed.

The results reveal cultural activities are linked with good health, life satisfaction and low depression in both men and women.

The findings were reported online in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* on May 23, 2011.

Simply observing culture – such as visiting an art gallery – improved men’s physical health and well-being, according to the study. But women seemed to benefit more from taking part in artistic activities, not just watching them.

The researchers suggest physicians and policymakers promote cultural activities as a simple way to lower stress.

BUT JUST ANY OLD HEART WON’T DO: According to a new study, older women are more picky than younger women when it comes to dating. They are also willing to travel further to meet their man.

Researchers at Georgia Southern University (Statesboro, Georgia) compared Internet personal dating profiles from 100 older and 100 younger people. They found older adults, especially older women, were more selective than younger adults about who they will date.

The findings appeared in the *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* (Vol. 72, Issue 1, 2011).

Results showed older women were less willing to compromise about characteristics in dating partners such as:

- age;
- height;
- race;
- religion; and
- income.

Older women preferred younger men because they were looking for partners with good health and mobility. They also favoured men with money.

The researchers concluded that older women daters wanted to meet the right person but not “just anyone”.