

# AGING HORIZONS BULLETIN

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## **Interview: Indigenous Scandinavian Sami People Tell Stories of Resilience and Hope**

*Sami people have lived in the Arctic region of the Scandinavian countries for thousands of years. Traditionally, the Sami have organized their lives around the movement of reindeer herds.*

*Today approximately 15,000 to 20,000 [Swedish Sami](#) maintain their rich culture while being part of Swedish society.*

*What can we learn from the Sami about the human journey, and the many ways of growing old in a multicultural world?*

*Lena Aléx at Umeå University in Sweden explored these questions in her study of old Sami women.*

*The findings, published in the September, 2016 issue of Ageing and Society, are mind-opening and uplifting.*

*To learn more, **AHB** reached Dr. Lena Aléx in Umeå, Sweden.*

**Ruth Dempsey:** Can you give me a brief description of the women in your study?

**Lena Aléx:** I interviewed nine Sami women who had experiences living in an indigenous Sami culture, and in a "roadless land" in the north of Sweden.

I met the women in their own homes over a period of two years. They ranged in age from 75 to 90. Three of the women were married and six were widows.

**RD:** Like Canada's indigenous peoples, the Swedish Sami have lived through a period of forced assimilation. What did this mean for the Sami?

**LA:** The women described difficult experiences when they had to live in special Sami boarding schools, far away from home. They were forbidden to speak their mother tongue.

Because these women spoke mostly Swedish, their children did not learn to speak their Sami language

They also described Swedish laws that forced reindeer owners to relocate, and reduced the possibilities for reindeer herding.

**RD:** How did they cope?

**LA:** The women talked about three things, in particular, that made a difference.

The first is feeling connected. For these Sami women, this meant living in a forceful family that nourished their feelings of being culturally special.

For instance, one woman recalled wearing the traditional Sami dress as a child. "We were hardly ever ill," she said, "despite the biting cold."

Spirituality fostered feelings of connectedness. The women described Sami hospitality and interest in people. Another said Christianity had encouraged a sense of solidarity towards others: "You never know who you are meeting, and if God passes, he walks in disguise."

And they spoke passionately of living close to the reindeer and the mountains. "Without the reindeer you were poor, both in spirit and soul," one woman observed. "Yes, they belonged to our lives."

**RD: A feeling of independence was also important...**

**LA:** That's right. Feeling independent meant being economically secure. They stressed the importance of having worked and earned their own money.

Five of the women had been reindeer owners, including one who had been a herder.

Fluency in the Swedish language meant they could work in mainstream society. Several told me that they had held jobs within Swedish society, two as teachers. One had several jobs in the south of Sweden, and one worked in a church as a young woman.

In old age, they appeared to be financially secure.

The women also talked about being on an equal footing with Sami men.

However, they noted that their work serving the herders, caring for children and making crafts was less highly regarded. For instance, sons who worked with herding had more opportunities to own reindeer because men were viewed as the breadwinner in the family.

One woman, reflecting on what life might have been if she had been born a boy, remarked with a laugh: "Yes, If I had been born a boy, I'd had been able to make a profit."

**RD: The third factor was the women's ability to extract meaning from their everyday lives. Can you give me an example?**

**LA:** The women derived meaning from sharing their stories. Several spoke poetically of belonging to the reindeer culture and the ancient Sami society.

For instance, one woman described standing outside the tepee as a young girl and looking at the stars and hearing the sound of the reindeer pushing their antlers against one another.

Another recalled being selected in her youth to meet the Swedish royal family.

Also, herding remained an important source of meaning for these old people. They compared herding from ancient days with herding today.

One woman had recently joined the herders to round up and sort out the reindeer.

Those too old to follow the reindeer, still longed for the mountains. "Yes, you know the mountains were very desirable in the summer time for migratory Sami," one woman said. "Yes, it is a longing. It is a terrible longing ... a desire."

For relaxation, the women created Sami arts and crafts. Crafting was also a way to express their creativity, and pass their cultural traditions on to their children and grandchildren. The women found immense satisfaction in using their mother tongue, which they had long been forbidden to speak. "It is so wonderful. You have no idea," one woman remarked.

### **RD: What about barriers to their well-being?**

**LA:** As I mentioned earlier, the women were forbidden to speak their language and compelled to attend boarding schools. They recalled weeping bitter tears when their parents were forced to leave them at the school.

These separations marked their lives and caused deep pain. One woman stated that this was a time when it was considered dirty and degrading to be a Sami.

Also, Swedish laws forced reindeer owners to move from their lands, resulting in great hardship.

One woman who did not own reindeer felt unfairly treated both by reindeer-owning Sami and the government. Later in life, she wanted to use her parents' cottage in the mountains, but neither the Swedish government nor the Sami village would allow it.

When the women talked about health, they stressed that they had been healthy and came from forceful families; yet they disclosed Tuberculosis had shadowed their lives. Some of their brothers and sisters had died from the disease. Some seemed to find it difficult to even mention TB, emphasizing they had not been carriers of the disease.

### **RD: So what do you take away from your study?**

**AL:** There are a couple of things that stand out for me.

These old people seem to find sharing their stories an important source of resilience, and a way to uphold their cultural identity.

The women emphasized the importance of family. But they also spoke of forging working lives of their own as reindeer owners, crafters, teachers or employees in other parts of Sweden. This was unusual for women born in this region, at this time. Few rural women in the north of Sweden had access to education. Most did domestic work.

The women also stressed that gender equality had always been important in Sami society. I found this astonishing. I expect they may have been influenced by debates advocating gender equality in Swedish society as well as the thinking of young, gender conscious Sami women.

The old people in our study were upbeat about their lives, despite years of discrimination and coercion by the Swedish state. As one woman remarked, "I have lived a happy and good life in a mix of two cultures."

### **RD: What is the status of the Sami in Sweden today?**

**AL:** Today there are many young and middle aged people in various parts of Sweden claiming their Sami identity.

In the past, people who belonged to a herding district or spoke a Sami language was recognized as a Sami. In 2000, this was changed. Today, a person who has a Sami relationship and who wishes to be defined this way, is identified as a Sami.

Sami children have the right to be taught their mother tongue in school. Also, television news is presented in the Sami language. Older adults are seeking to have Sami-speaking staff in nursing homes.

However, reindeer herding, which remains integral to the Sami way of life, is threatened by mining projects, which reduce pasture for the reindeer herds.

### **Study: Reach Out to Male Caregivers**

Women currently still outnumber men as the family caregivers, but this is shifting across countries from Europe to North America, including Canada.

The shift means that there are increasing numbers of older men caring for their spouses. However, few studies have looked at this growing, but under-recognized group.

New research, based on written narratives from 19 men caring for a spouse in the northwest of England, has found that older men experience caregiving differently from older women.

The men studied, aged 56 to 89, spent a period of between 10 months and 30 years caring for their wives.

Most were retirees or had given up working to care for their wives full-time. Men came from diverse backgrounds, including a factory worker, physician, farm worker and managing director of his own business.

The qualitative study also drew on in-depth interviews with a range of service providers to understand how the men used these services.

Christine Milligan and Hazel Morbey from Lancaster University reported their findings in the August, 2016 online issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies*.

### **Male approaches to caregiving**

Findings suggest that older men approach the practical aspects of caregiving by drawing on their prior working lives.

For example, "Jeffrey," a former factory worker, took a problem-solving approach.

His wife's degenerative disease meant that she was increasingly unable to cope with everyday tasks. Instead of doing them for her, he applied his knowledge and skills to make adaptations to the house, inserting swing doors, raising taps and adapting toilet seats, in order to facilitate her prolonged independence.

He also replaced difficult to manage buttons on his wife's clothing with Velcro in order to make it easier for her to dress herself.

"Joseph," a retired scientist, took a similar approach. On a trip to Iceland, he and his wife discovered that the hot water pools had healing properties that temporarily relieved her pain. When they returned home, Joseph used his scientific knowledge to replicate the effects of the hot pools within their home.

From another angle, the findings suggest men may be more reluctant than women caregivers to reach out for support, often waiting until they face a crisis.

"Ben," for example, had been caring for his wife with dementia for over five years. Ben convinced himself that he was coping "despite the fact that 'bad' days were becoming far more frequent than the good, that my fatigue was increasingly expressing itself in impatience, intolerance and harsh words."

One day, Ben found himself walking repeatedly by the office of a social service organization. Finally, he turned around and walked in.

According to service care professionals, only nine of 101 people referred to one service were older males caring for a spouse.

And, even when the men were offered assistance, most refused, hastening to reassure "We're fine, we're fine."

Service providers say many men do not identify themselves as caregivers but as husbands looking after their wives. As a result, they may perceive asking for help as a failure to provide adequately for their spouses.

### **Coping strategies**

For some participants, coping meant adopting a "can-do" attitude. For instance, "Peter" claimed his training in the armed forces helped him to keep going even when he felt overwhelmed.

Another participant, "Edward," said retaining some of his farm work gave him an outlet:

We are very blessed in having the farm as it gives "Rosemary" a nice place to live and I am usually not that far away should she run into trouble. It also gives me an interest so that I have no need to seek respite.

At least four men in the study found comfort in their religious faith, and the support of church members.

To cope, others turned to activities close to home, such as yoga, dog walking, writing or listening to music.

### **What is the impact of caregiving on older men?**

Findings suggest that the caregiving experience can have a significant impact on older men's sense of self and identity.

For one thing, the men's social world contracted after their wives became ill. Many were no longer able to join their male friends for social activities. For some, this led to feelings of isolation.

The men's narratives were peppered with comments relating to stress, self-doubt, and mental and physical exhaustion. Yet they seldom spoke to others about their caregiving responsibilities.

"Alistair", who turned to counseling for emotional support was uncomfortable sharing his need with friends. "I guess it's a 'man's thing,'" he wrote. "But it's a real obstacle to overcome – for me at least."

### **Shifting care landscape**

Early studies suggest older men experience care-giving differently from older women caregivers.

Yet resources for carers today are largely targeted to women.

Participants say social service agencies emphasize domestic work like cooking, cleaning, shopping and so forth, in assessing needs. Little attention is given to housing adaptations, paper work or the practical jobs that men usually do.

Jeffrey adapted the home to suit his wife's needs, and even took dressmaking classes to learn how to alter clothing, so she could dress more easily. However, his contribution garnered little recognition, even from those close to him.

"You're on a permanent holiday," one family member told him. "You just sit at home and do this, and you don't work do you?"

### **Reach out**

With an aging population and more older men caring for ill spouses, what needs to be done?

Milligan and Morbey say community services must work harder to reach out to male caregivers.

The authors want new research to focus on older men's unique needs, contributions and challenges, as spousal carers.

### **Guest Column: Sequins, Sisterhood and Belly Dancing**

*Older women are learning to belly dance for the sheer joy and the health benefits.*

*In this issue, sociologist and belly dancer Angela Moe, from Western Michigan University (Kalamazoo, MI, U.S.A), looks at the origins of belly dancing, and discusses her research (Journal of Women & Aging, Jan.31, 2014).*

#### **What exactly is belly dance?**

The phrase connotes scantily clad, long-haired, full-breasted women, sensually gyrating to exotic melodies in a dimly lit hooka bar.

It represents a modern and largely westernized adaptation of myriad dance forms from North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

In fact, belly dance has ancient roots as a respected tradition.

Archeological evidence from ancient Egypt and the lands lying on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea suggests dancing was central to the region's cultures – in ritual, celebration and community-building – since at least 3400 BCE.

Temple drawings, pottery, stone sculptures, and bone carvings point to a veneration of the female form over several millennia.

It is only in the past 150 years or so that belly dance has gained a reputation as erotic entertainment, an attitude largely influenced by Western European colonialism.

In the writings and paintings of French orientalists for example, women were frequently depicted as well-endowed and partially nude performers within harem or outdoor slave markets, whose singular goal was to titillate men.

Based on little factual evidence, these spectacles were documented in the travelogues of writers like Gustave Flaubert, and stage productions such as Oscar Wilde's *Salome*.

During this period, too, the name "belly dance" became popular. Several theories explain how this came to be. One suggests the term is a mispronunciation of the Egyptian Arabic word for "dance of the country" – *beledi*.

Another points to salacious marketing during the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, where dancers were imported to perform the "hootchy kootchy".

Over the past decades, perceptions of belly dance have changed little – until now.

Today, women in North America and other regions of the world are adopting belly dance as a form of leisure, exercise and creative expression.

My article is based on a study of American women aged 50 and older. I interviewed them as part of a larger project on the health benefits of belly dance. The women came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, abilities, educational levels and family structures.

### **Benefits abound**

Their experiences suggest belly dancing in later life holds many benefits.

**Mobility:** Physical mobility can be a concern as one ages. The women spoke about how belly dance helped them move in comfortable and pain-free ways.

One 50-year-old woman noted, "Belly dance is very nurturing to your body ... It is very forgiving. You can enter it at whatever place you are and use the tools at your disposal." Many felt that this form of movement, likely because it is fairly low-impact, is beneficial for warding off, or recovering from, physical debilities.

**Visibility:** Belly dance allows women to claim their right to remain visible in a world that often renders older women invisible.

As "Carmela," 58, explained:

Everybody wants you to conform ... everything falls on you.... In our culture old is no good, young is good. Fat is no good, skinny is good. Gray is no good, colouring your hair is good. It makes no sense, like all of a sudden you're not even human. Belly dancing gives you that back. It empowers you and makes you feel better about being a woman.

**Community:** Belly dancing also helped women extend their personal networks and build social support. "You look forward to seeing those women every week [in dance class]," one 51-year-old woman remarked.

Classes are open to women of all sorts, shapes, sizes and abilities. In this way, according to my study, belly dance served as a forum for communal joy, an opportunity for a special kind of sharing.

**Sensuality:** The women in my study were well aware that belly dancing is predominantly seen as erotic and seductive. For the most part, they disagreed.

As "Jherico," 68, put it:

Women are enjoying their own bodies and celebrating their femaleness in a way that is counter to society's ideas, not really trying to get the attention of men. Most of the belly dancers I know are dancing for the sheer joy of it, for the pleasure of being in their dancing bodies.... Belly dance gives us permission to move our torso and so everybody thinks it's sexual.... It's okay to be a woman. It's lovely to celebrate being female. Why is it bad?

### **Can anybody belly dance?**

I argue in my paper that yes, "every belly" can dance.

Unlike other codified forms of dance – ballet, jazz, tap – belly dance is a form of movement open to personal style and interpretation.

It's not surprising then, that women of all ages are turning to belly dance as a form of leisure and creative expression.

Further, for older women, belly dance provides a unique space to challenge and transcend society's expectations.

### **Study: Role of Churches in Age-Friendly Cities**

In just 15 years, two-thirds of the world's population will be living in cities, a quarter of them will be over 60.

According to the World Health Organization, creating "age-friendly" communities is one of the best ways to foster the well-being of older people.

Researchers at the University of Texas at Arlington have found that churches play a significant role in the development of "age-friendly" cities. Yet their role is largely ignored.

The qualitative study used data obtained from six ethnically diverse focus groups involving 45 participants, and interviews with 15 homebound adults in one large U.S. metropolitan city. Participants were aged between 55 and 92.

The new research found that churches foster well-being, among older adults, through:

- social activities
- volunteer opportunities, and
- providing health information.

The findings appeared online in the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* on April 4, 2016.

## **1. Social connectedness**

For a start, older adults touted home visits from the church pastor. As one homebound participant explained, "My husband has been diagnosed with Parkinson's, so our church's pastors are coming out once a month to visit with us and bring communion to us because he's not able to get to church anymore ... That's a real plus."

Others highlighted the positive effect of reaching out to other church members through prayer. "I have a list of 35 people I send scriptures to every morning," said one African American woman, "and when I get to church, they just, you know, they all come up and hug me."

The new data showed churches provide opportunities to foster interpersonal ties and friendships. This was of particular concern to one woman, who noted older people sometimes feel excluded from the younger community.

In addition, churches offer tangible support for older adults in the wider community through hospital visits and providing comfort in times of bereavement

## **2. Volunteering**

The research findings point to churches as important providers of volunteer opportunities.

Past research suggests volunteer activities enhance the quality of later life and boost psychological well-being. This was also the case for the participants in this study.

As one homebound participant put it, "Yeah, it's a big church.... You know, they have my name on the list. They'll call me. And if I'm having one of my good days, I can go. So I still can."

Another participant, who helps with garage sales and other activities around the church, claimed that volunteer work boosted his spirits: "When I arrived here I was very depressed and now I feel happy. I like to be useful and I like to contribute and participate as much as I can."

### **3. Information**

Significantly, the study found that churches are an important source of information for older adults, especially health information.

Many participants described church-sponsored health seminars on issues such as Alzheimer's disease and other chronic illnesses.

Church-based public health programs can provide opportunities to address health disparities, among older adults

One African American woman described health fairs at her church, where people can get tested twice a year for concerns such as high blood pressure, diabetes and osteoporosis.

#### **Churches play important role**

This study sheds light on how churches help older adults negotiate their late years and remain healthy and vital members of the community.

Past studies have shown that religion and spirituality can play an important role in guiding the lives of older adults as well as helping them establish meaning in their lives.

The researchers call for age-friendly community initiatives to more closely examine the value of churches in the lives of older people.

### **Roundup**

**THE SECRET OF INTIMACY:** Great lovers are made not born, according to Peggy Kleinplatz, a professor of medicine at the University of Ottawa, Canada.

Kelley Dixon, 74, agrees.

The resident of Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale in New York, Dixon told Winnie Hu at the *New York Times* that sex had become more important to him because it did not happen as regularly as he would like.

"It's not about bang-bang-and I will see you later. It's about enjoying the company of who you're having sex with," he said. "I'm not keeping track anymore. I don't have notches on my gun."

According to Kleinplatz, the depth of the connection between partners is a key component of extraordinary sex. In the *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, she writes, "It's being fully alive in one's skin, engaged with the partner – emotionally, intellectually, physically, spiritually – in the moment."

For the past decade, Kleinplatz and her research team have been studying what makes for optimal sexual experiences. When they put a call out for "great lovers" across Canada and the United States, responses poured in from older married people.

Researchers found people having flourishing sex lives in their 60s, 70s and 80s, accommodating whatever chronic illnesses or disabilities might come with their age.

Residential healthcare institutions have been slow to catch up with the desires of aging lovers.

Not so the Hebrew Home, which made waves in 1995 by creating the country's first sexual expression policy.

According to Daniel Reingold, the president and chief executive of RiverSpring Health, which operates Hebrew Home, the policy is intended to encourage intimacy among those who want it, and to protect others from unwanted advances and to provide guidelines for the staff.

Staff at the home have recently stepped up efforts to help residents look for relationships, launching a dating service, called G-Date, for Grandparent Date.

Francine Aboyoun, 67, who is on the waiting list, is hopeful that she will meet someone soon.

Berverly Herzog, 88, is also ready.

Herzog misses curling up with her late husband, Bernard: "I hate getting into a cold bed," she said. "I feel no one should be alone."

**COACH GARNERS OLYMPIC GOLD:** The coach for South African runner Wayde van Niekerk, who captured the gold medal in the 400 meters at the 2016 Olympic Games, kept getting turned away as she tried to get close to congratulate him.

Event officials apparently found it hard to believe that Anna Sofia Botha, 74, was coach of a runner, who had just broken one of the oldest world records in men's track and field.

Members of Team South Africa interceded for her and she finally got access to the Olympic Village.

A former athlete herself, Botha became head track and field coach at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa, in 1990.

She began coaching the 24-year-old Van Niekerk, in 2012.

Van Niekerk was not her only success at Rio. She also coached Akani Simbine, who finished fifth in the 100 meters.

Athletes describe Botha as a benevolent disciplinarian, who treats them as family.

Van Niekerk told the *New York Times*, "She doesn't see us as athletes or as people; she sees us as her children."

**BOOK UP FOR A LONGER LIFE:** Losing yourself in a book can be pure enjoyment. But could being a bookworm help you live longer?

New research from the Yale University School of Public Health in New Haven, CT, has found that people who read books for 30 minutes a day lived longer than those who didn't read at all.

The study, published in the September, 2016 issue of the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, examined the reading habits of 3,635 adults aged 50 and older. It found that book readers, on average, live almost two years longer than non-book readers.

The more people read, the more likely they were to live longer, and just 3.5 hours a week was enough to make a difference.

Interestingly, the study links the reading of books, rather than newspapers or magazines, to a longer life.

According to researchers, there are two cognitive processes involved in reading books that could create a "survival advantage." First, reading books promotes "deep reading," engaging readers' critical thinking skills and imagination as they ponder the content, and make connections with the material and the outside world.

Second, books promote empathy, social perception and emotional intelligence – all of which are cognitive processes that can lead to greater survival.

The study, titled "A Chapter a Day: Association of Book Reading with Longevity" suggests books are protective regardless of gender, health, wealth or education.

The current findings show an association between reading and long life. More research is needed to determine whether reading books actually cause people to live longer.

### **OLDER PEOPLE'S CREATIVITY INSPIRES PRIZE WINNER**

Don't be ashamed to be a human being, be proud! Inside you is an endless series of strong rooms, one after the other. You never come to an end, and that is how it should be.

– Tomas Tranströmer, *Roman Arches*

Anne Basting, a pioneering theatre artist, educator and researcher at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, is one of this year's winners of the MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Grant.

Basting founded [TimeSlips](#), an organization, which uses storytelling techniques to help cognitive-impaired older adults communicate, drawing on their artistic and creative capacities, rather than memory.

The MacArthur fellowship comes with a no-strings-attached grant of \$625,000 distributed over five years. The prestigious prize is awarded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for exceptional "originality, insight and potential."