

# AGING HORIZONS BULLETIN

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## Interview: Late-Blooming Artists Fascinate and Inspire

*Many are using retirement to launch new life chapters.*

**The Vintage Years** shows how those 60 years and older can rediscover themselves through the arts.

*In this illuminating work, psychologist and emeritus professor Francine Toder interviews 20 men and women. They reveal how they took up new pursuits – glasswork, local history, African drumming – to revitalize life.*

*To learn more, AHB reached Dr. Toder in Palo Alto, California.*

**Ruth Dempsey: Why did you want to learn the cello?**

**Francine Toder:** As a lifelong listener to classical music, I was smitten by the cello early on. But prior to my 60s, it never occurred to me that I could actually learn to play this magnificent string instrument.

When I began to consider how I could spend my time after retiring from my work as a psychologist, I realized that there was nothing to stop me from trying.

Three years later, not only can I play music but I can more fully appreciate the experience of hearing beautiful music played by others. I opened a door to a part of myself that I didn't know existed.

**RD: Why focus on the arts?**

**FT:** Almost 50 years ago when I was in graduate school, very little was known about the resilience of the over-60 brain. At that time, there was no point in studying a life stage that eluded most people.

When I was in my 20s this seemed irrelevant, but, as I approached 70, I was very interested in updates in neuroscience that would shed light on ways to maintain brain vigor along with physical and psychological well-being.



Francine Toder is the author of  
*The Vintage Years*

I was betting that I would live a long life, and, if I did, I wanted to create the right tonic for stimulating cognitive functioning. But I wondered what would give me the most bang for my buck.

I decided to do some research, and several findings led to the fine arts. For one thing, the fine arts have survival value in terms of evolutionary psychology. Music may have predated language. Similarly, cave paintings were an essential part of communicating dangers and the life cycle events, and story telling was the precursor of writing.

They are also pursuits that give pleasure and meaning and they allow for intense focus, which are good for the brain and psyche.

**RD: You talked to some wonderful musicians, visual artists and writers, Can you give me a thumbnail sketch of the musicians? Is there one that stands out for you?**

**FT:** The musicians were drawn to their instruments for different reasons.

For some, it was an unrealized longing from the past to play the piano or cello, for example. For others, it was curiosity about what else they could do at this point in their lives. Sometimes it was just plain accidental, as in inheriting a musical instrument.

In general, fewer people choose to learn to play an instrument than dive into painting or writing. Learning to read music feels like a significant challenge. In fact, it's quite demanding but perfect for exciting the brain.

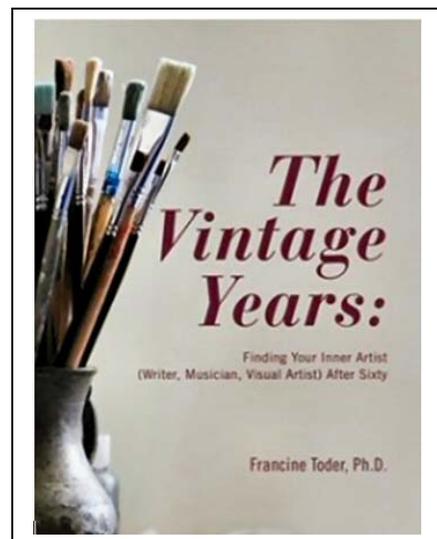
The viola da gamba player stands out. She picked a very exotic instrument. It's difficult to play, and it's held between the knees even though it's as large as a cello.

The 81-year-old woman, whom I write about in the book, practices for two hours a day and drives more than 100 miles roundtrip for her lessons.

**RD: What about the writers?**

**FT:** The single commonality was their desire to express their ideas in the written word. This had to wait until they had time to concentrate, meaning the retirement years.

None of the writers I interviewed had formal training; they just started writing. Whether it was short stories, poems, novels or historic nonfiction, all of the writers valued their carved-out privacy where they could enter into their work and become fully absorbed.



The oldest writer in my book didn't start writing until her mid-80s, when, after her mother's death at 107, she found the time and space to focus.

**RD: I was enthralled by the visual artists. Henry worked in his family's meat business until he retired at 68, when he turned to woodcarving . . .**

**FT:** Ironically, he whittled objects with his pen knife as a child, and used a knife as butcher long before taking up woodcarving in retirement. Unlike most of the artists in the book, it was easy to connect the dots in his life. At 96, he was still working his much-loved hobby.

**RD: Julie, a former computer programmer became a botanical watercolorist . . .**

**FT:** Her father was a well-known architect and, as a child, she was intimidated by his artistic abilities. Inheriting his artist tools after he died stirred her curiosity, which she put to good use after she retired. Now she spends her time creating botanical watercolours so exquisite you feel like you can touch and almost smell them.

**RD: And Betsy, a research physicist, became a ceramics artist after illness forced her to take early retirement . . .**

**FT:** She floundered for a while after her physical recovery while searching for something meaningful and pleasurable to do with her time. When she discovered her art form, she became hooked and she now feels passionately connected to her artist's lifestyle.

**RD: You show how interest in the arts benefits aging brains. Can you give me an example?**

**FT:** What I consider the magical triad of ingredients for stimulating brain activity: newness, complexity and problem solving are available in abundance by practicing one of the fine arts. Because these pursuits are so pleasurable and meaningful, it's easy to become immersed. The process is intense and very satisfying while it also stimulates cognitive functioning.

Beginning to play a musical instrument, sculpt or write a haiku checks the boxes for newness and also complexity as these art forms require some understanding of how ideas fit together.

Problem solving also comes into play, for example, with the stained glass artist I write about. He created larger and larger pieces and finally crafted a gigantic glass window for a church. He had to learn some structural engineering concepts to make sure his window was strong enough to account for its massive weight. It had to be more than a thing of beauty – it had to endure.

**RD: What was the best thing about writing your book?**

**FT:** Through my talks, I've met some extraordinary people who share their stories with me. Their enthusiasm about the subject of my book is very satisfying.

Also, entering into a fine art creates a new community of like-minded people. This is healthy psychologically, especially as we age.

In high school, I wanted to be a journalist but that goal got sidetracked pretty quickly. Now nearly 60 years later, I'm blogging for *The Huffington Post* as well as print and online magazines. I've come full circle and I love it.

Editor's note: *The original article appeared in AHB March/April 2014.*

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### **Study: Technology Changes Meaning of Home**

More and more older Canadians opt for surveillance technology to remain at home.

Health-related technologies, like those featured in ambient assisted living, have exploded in recent years. Ambient Assisted Living (AAL) technology uses sensors and wearable devices to monitor health, detect emergencies and report unusual behaviour. Communications networks provide assistance and encouragement during daily activities.

So how does this novel technology influence individuals' experience of home?

B.C. researchers led by Ben Mortenson from University of British Columbia conducted in-depth interviews with 27 community-dwelling individuals, aged 60 to 95, in search of an answer.

The participants were recruited from Vancouver, B.C. and San Francisco, California. All had at least one chronic disease, and nearly half used a mobility device such as a walker or scooter. Most of the participants were female, and almost half had been hospitalized in the year prior to the study.

In addition to interviews, older adults viewed a promotional video for a home monitoring system. On completion of the video, the researchers asked participants to describe their thoughts and feelings, and the potential effect that AAL may have upon them and how it might change the meaning of their home environments.

"No Place Like Home? Surveillance and What Home Means in Old Age," appeared in the March 2016 issue of the *Canadian Journal on Aging*.

### **Home sweet home**

Previous research has shown that older people who need support want to continue living at home. This was also the case for the participants in this study.

Seventeen of the participants described home as a safe place where they felt secure.

As Elizabeth, 75, put it, "I feel free and . . . I am still able to do things that need to be done and things I want to do."

Most of the older adults felt that AAL would make them feel more secure in their homes.

"When you are experiencing various physical symptoms and live by yourself, it's easy to get a little bit frightened of incidents happening and not being able to summon assistance," one 77-year-old woman explained.

Almost all of the participants gave thumbs up to the use of medication reminders for those with memory problems. Most were unconcerned that the system might be set up to contact an informal caregiver if a dose was missed. However, one 63-year-old was uneasy with the medication reminding system, saying that "It depends on the individual."

### **Under the microscope**

The researchers found participants were willing to trade personal privacy for the potential to remain at home. Yet two-thirds of the older adults raised concerns about privacy.

For example, Maria didn't want a camera looking at her in her home. "It's like someone going through your garbage," she said.

Similarly, Debra claimed, "It would be . . . like living in a nursing home in your own home."

Others expressed concerns about personal dignity. For example, Colleen, an 88-year-old with a bilateral hip replacement asserted: "I wouldn't want to be watched going in and out on the bathroom. That would be . . . encroaching on my privacy."

In addition, several worried about which caregivers would have access to their AAL data, and how it would be used.

As one woman explained:

If an incident happened and the family had wanted to gain more control over their father's finances, they could use the data to display that his cognitive function is declining: 'So it's time for us to step in there and handle all of his finances.'

### **Caregivers**

Many of the participants felt that AAL would reduce stress and relieve pressure on their families and other caregivers.

But some worried that the new technology would make them feel like more of a burden. "I wouldn't want anything where people had to spend their lives devoted to checking on me all the time," one man stated.

And two of the participants raised concerns about whether AAL could contribute to experiences of loneliness. As one participant explained:

Sometimes older people are really lonely, and, so in a society where resources are not available or limited, I think that people could be left on their own under the watchful eye of the device rather than receiving personal contact.

### **Striking a balance**

Older adults believed the home-based surveillance system could contribute to their sense of security and enable them to stay at home longer.

At the same time, the research showed participants felt AAL would influence their sense of autonomy and self-confidence and alter their perceptions of home.

The study concludes AAL may have the potential to empower residents who adopt it, given the users have control over:

- who has access to their sensor data
- how alerts are triggered, and
- what responses are provided.

### **Few options**

Faced with limited home care, people are accepting technologies because they realize technology can help keep them at home.

This trend is likely to accelerate as the population ages. But as Mortenson and his colleagues point out, the experience of "old age" is socially constructed, and tracking technologies are part of the new social context in which the experience of aging is played out.

Better home care, and more [communal housing options](#) would mean older Canadians could rely on assistance from others to maintain their independence, and thereby reduce their dependence on technology.

## Guest Column: Study Circles Foster Friendship and Well-Being

*Older adults use study circles to foster friendship and enrich later life.*

*In this issue, political scientist Pelle Åberg from Ersta Sköndal University College in Stockholm, Sweden, leads us through the origins of Swedish study circles. He explains how they work and he discusses his research (Educational Gerontology, Jan. 14, 2016).*

### Study circles

In Sweden, participation in study circles is widespread and receives substantial state support – the equivalent of almost C\$250 million in 2015.



Dr. Pelle Åberg

Study circles have been a central part of the Swedish tradition of "folkbildning". Folkbildning is difficult to translate into English. It refers to activities commonly known as popular education.

During the early 1900s, political and societal transformations in Sweden led to popular movements becoming legitimate and strong actors in Swedish society. State support strengthened the role of these movements and their educationally-orientated organizations.

In Sweden today, we have 10 nation-wide "study associations." These organizations organize a host of voluntary learning activities, study circles being at the forefront.

In 2015, these 10 associations organized around 275,000 study circles, which attracted almost 1.7 million participants.

### Characteristics

Swedish study circles have several characteristics. For one thing, study circle activities are not about increasing one's formal competence. Instead, the activities focus on learning for personal development and for the joy of learning.

Activities are free, voluntary and inclusive.

In Swedish popular education, the activities and the learning process begin with the individual learner. Thus, the would-be teacher — called the study circle leader — is not a central figure but, rather, part of the group.

Study circles offer spaces where a broad spectrum of people engage in a wide range of learning activities. The social dimension is stressed, and learning is seen as a collective effort.

## Organization

Generally speaking, study circles come about in one of three ways.

Study circles can be organized under the umbrella of one of the 379 civil society organizations that are members of the "study associations." These include sports clubs, pensioners' groups and patients organizations, to mention a few.

For example, people who like to hunt can become a member of a study circle in hunting. Circle participants learn the steps required to become a licensed hunter and receive assistance in preparing for the test. These study circles result from collaboration between the study association Studieförbundet and the Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management (Svenska Jägareförbundet).

Study associations can also organize study circles and pitch them to the general public. Circles focused on language learning, for example, or how to play a musical instrument.

Finally, study circles can be sparked by a group of individuals coming together to pursue a common interest, say a love of literature.

By turning to a study organization and formally organizing themselves as a study circle, a group can get support for its activities. Support can include financial support to help purchase books or material support, like getting to use the premises of the study association.

A common example of the latter is a band that organizes their rehearsals as a study circle to get access to appropriate rooms.

## Benefits

In Sweden, adults 65 years and older make up more than one third of the total number of study circle participants, with many engaging in all three types of circles.

My article focused on links between feelings of well-being and participation in study circles. Specifically, I looked at why older adults participate in study circles and what they gained from the experience.

I found that many older adults emphasized the social aspects of learning.

A majority of participants reported they joined study circles to improve their knowledge and skills in an area of interest. But most often, being part of the circle fellowship — as well as the opportunity to meet new people — trumped other reasons for getting

involved. As one pensioner put it, "Apart from learning how to cook, the fellowship and working in a group meant a lot. We had fun."

When we looked at the benefits of participation, we found similar results.

Almost everyone claimed they gained new knowledge and skills through sharing their experiences. But, again, the sense of belonging to a group was paramount.

Most of the participants in my study also claimed involvement in study circles boosted their sense of well-being.

So, it seems the shared experience of learning with other people in a study circle can be one way for older adults to avoid loneliness and enhance their well-being.

As I mentioned earlier, study circles focus on personal development. So participating in study circles can be a way, not just to meet new people, but to stay mentally fit and continue growing throughout life. One pensioner summed it up this way: "You have something to look forward to. Everyday life becomes more interesting."

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### Interview: When One Partner Retires

*Eileen Cooley's husband retired at age 55, and she continued to work full-time. But she was surprised by the impact of his retirement on her relationship and family life.*

*She is not alone.*

*Research shows that staggered retirement can lead to emotional and financial challenges for married couples. Conflict is especially common in couples in which the husband is newly retired and the wife continues to work.*

*Cooley teamed up with Gail Adorno to examine this important lifestyle transition more closely. Their article: "Advice From Working Women With Retired Partners" appeared in the Journal of Women & Aging on March 2, 2016.*

**AHB** reached Dr. Cooley at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia, U.S.A



Dr. Eileen Cooley

**Ruth Dempsey:** So who were the people in your study?

**Eileen Cooley:** We surveyed almost 100 women who were recruited from multiple sources including university alumnae organizations, national aging groups, professional organizations and word of mouth. They ranged in age from 39 to 83. The majority of participants were heterosexual white women.

**RD:** They describe the challenges that come with a mixed-retirement marriage.

**EC:** That's right. The women noted significant changes in themselves, their partners and their relationships, following their partner's retirement.

They identified difficulties in four areas:

- time management and activities
- household roles and responsibilities
- finances, and
- communication.

Many talked about the unpredictable nature of this lifestyle adjustment. They suggested women “be flexible” and simply “hang on for the ride.”

**RD:** What did they say about time management?

**EC:** Certainly, a shift in thinking is required for both partners when daily routines become so different.

It seems many of the retirees had not planned how they would spend their time after leaving the workforce. The women worried as their husband's struggled to come to terms with their new state, especially the loss of a daily structure.

With regard to themselves, women emphasized the importance of maintaining their own independent activities. “Keep your own life full,” they said.

**RD:** What about household responsibilities?

**EC:** Many respondents had hoped that their partner would take on more household chores now that he was home more of the day. In some cases this did not happen, causing conflict and disappointment.

At the same time, some women discussed their own need to relinquish control of the home environment. They had to learn to be satisfied with how their partner completed specific tasks.

Others mentioned the importance of appreciating the little things their partner did to make their life easier like making coffee in the morning and running errands.

**RD: Couples were also living with less income . . .**

**EC:** Many women discussed the need to adapt to a lower income. Concerns in this area focused on the need to set financial goals and parameters *before* rather than *after* retirement.

**RD: Communication was another important issue. Can you give me an example?**

**EC:** The respondents talked about communication as both a problem and a solution.

"Discuss retirement *before* doing it" was a common refrain.

Many felt that money, time management and household responsibilities had to be negotiated in advance. Couples may not be on the same page on issues so there will need to be give-and-take.

Their advice: "Express your feelings openly, as retirement will affect you in ways you might not expect."

**RD: Some talked about the need for shared time and separate time . . .**

**EC:** Yes, the importance of identifying and developing separate and shared activities was emphasized by several women.

One woman suggested creating two bucket lists, an individual list and a joint list.

The presence of these bucket lists appeared to put a positive spin on the couples' efforts to adjust to this new phase of life.

**RD: Psychologist Maryanne Vandervelde talks about that too, recommending "parallel play." The idea of two individuals engrossed in separate but parallel activities.**

**EC:** Yes, ideally in retirement, both spouses have private time apart to explore personal interests and time together to share common interests.

**RD: So staggered retirement demands careful planning?**

**EC:** That's right. Advance planning is essential to making retirement arrangements work. Even if one person retires, both partners are affected.

Leading two different realities can lead to a variety of challenges, both emotional and financial. Couples need to have frequent conversations about what they want the next phase of life to look like, before they take the step.

If communication is difficult for a couple, they may benefit from counseling to address the changes that are likely to occur in their daily routine.

Indeed, our research suggests vigilant communication can pay dividends as couples continue to adapt to changes associated with retirement and the later years.

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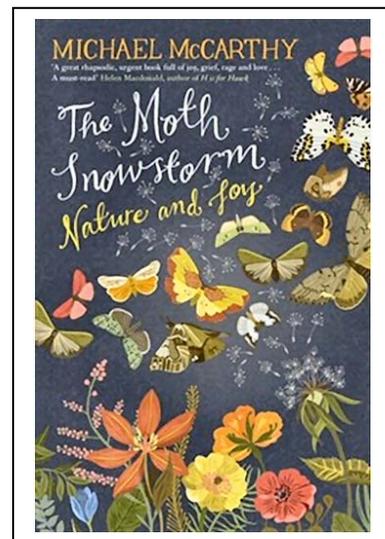
## Roundup

**MOTHER'S ILLNESS SPARKS SON'S LOVE OF BUTTERFLIES:** In 1954, Michael McCarthy's mother was committed to an asylum when he was seven years old, and he was sent to live with his aunt.

With the departure of his mother, Norah, McCarthy disappeared into his own world.

Then one bright Sunday morning playing in his aunt's garden in Merseyside, in north west England, he encountered a tall buddleia bush alive with butterflies. He observed red admirals, peacocks, painted ladies and small tortoiseshells — like jewels in the dazzling sun.

The small boy was mesmerized: "Butterflies entered my soul," he recalls.



Norah regained her health. And during his adolescence McCarthy began to bond with his mother, sharing a love of poetry. Her generous spirit won him over. He hesitantly confided in her about a love affair. She seemed to understand fully, and they grew even closer.

Now 30 years after her death, McCarthy tells the story of his troubled childhood in his new book *The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy*.

But the book is only partly memoir, *The Moth Snowstorm* is an impassioned case for nature, told through his adventures as environment correspondent of *The Times* and later as environment editor of *The Independent*.

In one heart-breaking chapter entitled, "The Great Thinning," he describes how the English countryside has lost 50 per cent of its biodiversity in his lifetime.

McCarthy wants us to defend nature by bonding with it. By understanding that our ancient link with the natural world is part of our essence – the natural home for our psyches.

He argues that we all have the capacity to experience hope and joy in nature. Should we lose it, he writes, "We would find true peace impossible."

**YOGA ATTRACTS MORE OLDER ADULTS:** Strength, flexibility and self-care. These are the reasons more people than ever are choosing to practice yoga.

A study by researchers at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, found older adults pursued yoga as a way to prevent or reduce the symptoms of chronic illness and reduce stress.

Women, in particular, used yoga to try to prevent osteoporosis and slow bone density loss.

In contrast, middle-aged persons engaged in yoga to increase muscle strength and for weight loss.

Additionally, participants talked about the balancing effects of yoga in daily life. As Philip, 53, put it, "If you have yoga, you can hopefully go with the flow with other parts of your life."

Yoga sessions also offered practitioners opportunities to meet like-minded people and a space to experience a sense of community.

Many felt that private yoga studios were too expensive. Several of the participants went to community centres to keep the costs down.

*On and Off the Mat : Yoga Experiences of Middle-Aged and Older Adults* appeared in the June, 2016 issue of the *Canadian Journal on Aging*.

**PHYSICIAN EMBRACES DEMENTIA:** Dr. Jennifer Bute was running a busy general practice in Somerset, England, when she noticed she was becoming forgetful.

She was eventually diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in her late 50s, but she was determined to find practical ways of living with the disease. "You live with dementia," she says. "You don't suffer it."

Writing in the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*, she notes, "We should look at the person with dementia not as a 'damaged' person, but as someone who is loved by God."

Dr. Bute has released videos, offering tips for families and health professionals, as well as a wide a range of [activities suitable for all stages of the disease](#).

**SHINING EXAMPLES OF LIVING WITH PURPOSE:** Jamel Joseph, co-founder of the IMPACT Repertory Theatre in Harlem, encourages teenagers to use their personal experiences to create art and change the community around them.

The film professor spent a large part of his own teenage years behind bars.

Last February, Joseph, 62, was awarded the Purpose Prize in recognition of his work.

The Purpose Prize was created by [Encore.org](#), a U.S. nonprofit organization, focused on mobilizing the talents and experiences of individuals over the age of 60.

Now in its 10th year, the Purpose Prize has garnered nearly 10,000 nominations and awarded more than \$5 million to over 500 individuals. The awards are funded by the John Templeton Foundation and The Atlantic Philanthropies.

This year, six individuals received combined awards amounting to \$225,000.

Dr. Samuel Lupin, 77, won for Intergenerational Collaboration. In partnership with his son-in-law and grandson, he modernized the traditional doctor's house call, creating Housecalls for the Homebound. Housecalls has brought medical care to more than 4,000 patients in the greater New York City area.

And Belle Mickelson, 67, an Episcopal priest and former science teacher, received a \$25,000 Purpose Prize for Intergenerational Impact. Mickelson launched *Dancing With the Spirit* in 2006. The program travels to isolated parts of Alaska, bringing together Native Alaskan elders and young people to share music and stories.