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On being older and growing

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ABSTRACT

In this article, Margaret describes how she has lived the last decade with a positive approach to being older. She notes some of the key people who have influenced her, outlines the five key ingredients that contribute to her well-being, gives examples of affirming research for this way of living, and tasks of later life that now give structure to her explorations. In discussion of a current problem, she demonstrates how she continues towards becoming her true self.

At the beginning of my seventy-third year, I was despondent for about 10 days. I'd said to myself, 'You can't put off calling yourself an "older" woman any longer!' I was unconsciously claiming for myself the status of ageing and the attitude to ageing that I'd been developing since I was a child.

One way of understanding this is through stereotype embodiment theory (Levy, Zonderman, Slade, & Ferrucci, 2009), whereby age stereotypes are internalized from the culture from early on. At some point, these age stereotypes become 'self stereotypes' about oneself as an ageing individual. These self-stereotypes, which are consciously and unconsciously activated, exert their effects on our lives and health.

After a miserable few days, I decided that the prospect of taking the current negative and colourless stereotype of ageing was too dismal an approach for what might be at least another decade of life. Perhaps there was another way of looking at these years. Maybe they could be years of vitality and growth, and so I started to look for a different approach to ageing from the current, predominant one in western society.

For a couple of years, I read on this subject, and summarized my readings in what I refer to as the 'five keys', under the headings of A, B, C, D and E – Attitudes (and beliefs), Body and Brain, Connection, Doing for others, and Engaging fully in meaningful activity – so that I could easily check how I was going and what might need more attention at different times.

Much of what I think now, as well as the resources I use to guide me in this new stage of life, are based on the maps of maturity I garnered from past sages. I am composing and living a counter story to that of the powerful misery narrative of old age I have inherited. In doing this, I deliberately avoid negative 'primings' whenever possible (Levy, 2002) and hence the positively 'biased' views in this article.

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My path to intentional elderhood

I have always been curious about what makes people tick. In my thirties, I read every book from the 'Pastoral Psychology Book Club' to which my husband, who was a vicar, and his colleagues had a shared subscription. In the evenings, after I'd put our four children to bed, and my husband was out at parish meetings, I devoured books by Carl Rogers, (Rogers, 1961). Abraham Maslow, Paul Tournier, Eric Fromm, Rollo May, Eric Berne and many others. They opened up a whole new, exciting world to me. I also studied a few papers in sociology, to see if my brain still worked after 20 years of home-making and mothering.

I learned that we construct our own reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This book blew my mind, almost literally. As I came to grips with its constructivist message, I actually felt something change in my head, and I have never looked at the world in the same way again. I was in my early forties. The book rang true to me. Since then, I have endeavoured to question anything that seems even slightly suspect, or is a difficulty to me, like the current construction of old age.

When I was 50, I trained to be a therapeutic counsellor, specializing in career and life planning. In my seventies, it was a logical step to ask what I might do in this next stage of my life and to plan for it.

For our generation, Jung's 'afternoon of life' has been extended into a long summer evening. I read widely and excitedly about others' journeys and research into these bonus 30 or so years we are offered through medical, scientific and technical advances.

I am committed to what I call 'intentional elderhood'. Long ago, I decided to do what I can to construct my own reality, that is, to design what I can of my future, rather than to wait for it to happen to me. My experiment appears to have worked so far, with a lot of intention and a modicum of good luck. It's the path of intentional elderhood**,** as opposed to the mindless road along which many wander, that serves as pseudo guidance as we enter what Dante referred to as the 'dark wood' (Hollander, 1997, p. 3) at midlife, when our societal scripts run out. As a result, I have the energy to examine even more of what makes me and others tick, which excites and intrigues me.

The five keys to well-being

For the past decade, I've lived according to the five keys I developed from my exploring. These keys are well supported by research, and publicized widely and regularly. For example, three recent articles in the New Zealand magazine *The Listener* have focused on health and well-being: 'Making Plans with Nigel' to 'money-train your brain' (Hewitson, 2017); 'The Bright Stuff' on 'how to boost learning' (Pellegrino, 2017); and 'Scent Off! Do Swirling Chemicals Harm You?' (Blundell, 2017).

The simple A, B, C, D, E guidelines focus my behaviour and give my life some structure often missing in later life.

Attitude

Our attitude and beliefs matter. They are the basis of our behaviours. For the past 10 years, I have chosen to believe that I can be vigorous, well and active, for many more years than

most people seem to believe or expect. I deliberately aim to be energetic in my mind, body, spirit and socially also, though I don't always succeed. I am inspired and convinced to live this way by the research findings, and the enthusiasm of the positive ageing proponents I have studied.

The importance of our beliefs and the interrelatedness of our whole self is supported by research in mindbody medicine. Ellen Langer's research is startling. She explores 'the psychology of possibility' (Langer, 2009, p. 15). Her mindfulness concept (Langer, 1989) appears plausible and full of common sense. Mindlessness is the thoughtless application of old ways of thinking to new situations without considering whether they are applicable, and the reverse attitude plus behaviour can produce surprising changes. For example, after one and a half years, rest home members who chose to look after a houseplant, and made small decisions about daily routines, were more cheerful, active and alert. Less than half of these people had died, compared with those in the control group. Most inspiring of all, the 70-year-old men at a holiday weekend who behaved as though they were 50, rather than just thinking about when they were 50, improved after testing for blood pressure, joint flexibility, finger length, sitting height, weight, manual dexterity and vision without glasses, and they improved in intelligence tests. I tested this out for myself. For example, I experimented with my walking pace: when I walked more quickly, I actually felt more alive and energetic – I still do (walk more quickly), and still do (feel more alive).

Dr Roger Booth at the University of Auckland Research Group researches mindbody connection (Booth, 2007). He said: 'Scientific studies constitute some of the strongest evidence supporting what personal experiences many people consider common sense – that thoughts, feelings and expectations contribute to illness and health' (Booth, 2006).

Ageism is *the* greatest danger to one's health and well-being in later life. It exerts an insidious, destructive effect on all of us, young and old. It creeps into our minds through jokes, cartoons, TV programmes, influencing our performance, mood, bodily functions, memory and more (Nelson, 2002). We use words like 'young' and 'old' carelessly, unaware of the damage this does (Bytheway, 2005); and words like 'disease' in the same breath as old(er) age. For example, the researcher of a reputable New Zealand study recently raised a very good question: 'What is going on in our middle years?' (Chisholm, 2017, p. 38), but, then, in the very next sentence, writes: 'When do the subtle signs of the diseases that will eventually claim us first appear?' We are cued into the inevitable expectation that old age is disease-ridden, but we don't actually know what is possible after midlife. Maybe changing one's lifestyle may make a difference. Maybe we can live now and decay later.

Many times I have been tempted to yield to the pressure of others' expectations of how a woman of my age should look and act, but whenever I yield to pressure – from contemporaries, from my own inclination to do nothing, or to give way to an argument like 'Don't overdo things! You are, after all, well into your old age, and deserve a rest at this time of your life' and so on – I feel as though I am on a downhill slope towards infirmity and helplessness. I do not like that feeling at all. An older friend of mine says we must 'accept our age, but not succumb'.

My aim is to stay buoyant for as long as I can, hopefully until I am breathing my last breath:

> The gift of going forward is not that you'll never physically decline or fall ill, but that you'll be less likely to do so prematurely, and better able to enter wholly into your life and meet whatever the world brings you with grace and wisdom. (Robbins, 2006, p. 273)

Carl Rogers writes of his positive approach to older age in a 1980 article. I acknowledge him with gratitude as I use a version of his title for this article.

Body and brain

I give more time now to my body than I have ever done, and keep myself active. I figure I may as well spend time in preventative activities rather than with the surgeon. My doctor said, 'Oh, maintenance is such a good thing!' I observe that I feel better when I have been physically and mentally active. Based on this attitude, I deliberately encourage myself to go to the gym, though I'm not naturally keen on sport or fitness. I began by deliberately telling myself that I felt better physically and mentally after exercise, and now when I am not so active, I feel sluggish, fidgety and dispirited.

I read books that reinforced this emphasis on movement. (Crowley & Lodge, 2004, 2005; Robbins, 2006). I recently bought an activity tracker to encourage me. Nowadays, I start the day with a few creaky joints, stiff muscles and slow steps, especially on stairs. After an hour of yoga or the gym, I no longer have most of them. A few remain, associated with arthritis in my hands.

It is common knowledge that what is good for the body is good for the brain. Both respond to regular use and occasional strenuous workouts. I was greatly cheered when I learned that our brains continue to grow and flourish in the second half of our life (Cohen, 2005). Cohen's guidelines for brain health include physical activity, which boosts brain power, especially that which uses big muscle groups, increasing blood flow to the brain and oxygen levels. So, I go to the gym. A bonus is that I enjoy the company of others there.

The brain has been shown to be plastic and able to change itself (Doidge, 2007). Mental exercise develops new synapses and brain cells. It is more efficacious when we work up a mental sweat. Engaging in challenging leisure activities, such as dancing, board games, playing a musical instrument, doing crossword puzzles and reading, is recommended. It's a great excuse for me to read, and to spend time in book groups, and to learn new things.

Richard Faull at the University of Auckland emphasizes this need for challenging physical and mental activity. On the New Zealand Neurological Foundation's Brain Roadmap (Neurological Foundation of New Zealand, 2012), six highlighted factors are: exercise the body, have a balanced diet, have adequate sleep, stay socially connected, manage stress, and keep the mind active. Faull's research continues to show that the brain is plastic and the growth of stem cells may eventually be stimulated to renew cells to boost memory. We can actively promote this growth to mitigate the loss of brain function, especially memory loss. Our minds grow stronger from use and challenge. I am inspired by the concept of cognitive reserve (Stern, 2012) and that memory loss is not inevitable in old age (Levy & Langer, 1994).

Lifetime experiences, such as education, engaging occupations and leisure activities have been shown to have a major influence on how we age, specifically on whether we will develop Alzheimer's symptoms or not. Yaakov Stern is a key proponent of the

cognitive reserve theory, which aims to explain why some individuals with full Alzheimer's pathology (accumulation of plaques and tangles in their brains) can keep normal lives until they die, while others, with the same amount of plaques and tangles, display the severe symptoms we associate with Alzheimer's disease.

Different activities have independent, synergistic contributions, which means the more things we do and the earlier we start, the better. The brain is flexible and adaptable. We can learn new tricks in a dramatically different way from those with or when we had younger brains. For example, I bought a new cell phone recently. I told myself, 'It's good to struggle with and master basic 2017 technology' and better than continually complaining how difficult it is to be a digital immigrant. I also figure that it requires me to use my body and my brain together, which is recommended, as in dancing, singing and so on: 'We've seen that the older brain is more resilient, adaptable, and capable than we thought, and we've learned about our key brain attributes' (Cohen, 2005, p. 23).

Connection

Social connectedness is a major influence in healthy ageing. Humans are social animals and need contact with others. Haslam, Cruwys, Haslam, and Jetten (2015) have researched and endorsed the relationships between social connectedness, life expectancy, mental health and cognitive health, and that it is beneficial to have affirming networks, and is associated with increased longevity. They conclude: 'There is no doubt that social relationships matter for health, whatever our age, and that some relationships are more protective than others' (p. 8). This contact is more beneficial when our connections endorse our identity, our desired persona: 'In other words, we are built for social contact. There are serious – life-threatening – consequences when we don't get enough. We can't stay on track mentally. And we are compromised physically. Social skills are crucial for your health' (Cacioppo, 2016, quoted by Marano, 2003).

I enjoy other people's company – but I have noticed that, as I grow older, I become more selective about friends and activities, tending to spend more time with people and in pursuits that affirm my values and interests. We have to consciously maintain and build satisfying social networks, and deliberately make new friends as former friends die, callous as that may sound.

We do well to think wider and further than attaining independence. From when we are children, our aim is to be boss of our own lives. Eventually we cut the apron strings and make our way out into the big world ourselves, to get the key to the door at aged 20 or 21, symbolically or literally. But if we continue to grow, we reach the point of seeing that Stephen Covey is right: 'Interdependence is a higher value than independence' (1989, p. 1). This makes a lot of sense. We are all interconnected. The *whanau*, the extended family and community, is greater than the couple, or the 'nuclear' family. It takes a village to raise a child. Likewise, it takes a village to sustain an adult, and an elder.

In some societies, each generation helps the others. Children are cared for by elders, and, in turn, when they need it, elders are cared for by those who can do so. If this is a taken-for-granted aspect of life, when someone needs help with any aspect of living, basic or less basic, they will be more able to accept that help without feeling of less value or diminished because they have that need, and those who give will take for granted that it is their role to give, without any sense of superiority.

I will pay more attention to this in the next years. I am aware that when I am not able to drive any more, my husband and I would be very isolated. It may be a significant factor for us in choosing to live in a retirement community or not.

Doing for others

This key – 'doing for others' – deserves more of my attention now that I am almost 'retired' from paid work.

Many older people support and care for others, both their friends and family and those in the wider community. Doing things voluntarily for other people can bring gains to the giver, including better mental health. 'Studies have shown volunteers have more resources, a larger social network, more power and more prestige, and this in turn leads to better physical and mental health' (Tabassum, Mohan, & Smith, 2016, p. 1). For some people, it is their 'raison d'etre'. For some, their contribution may only be a smile, but a smile can change someone's day. Some worthwhile organizations miss out on attracting voluntary help because they provide little support or incentive. We want to be either learning totally new skills, or to be using our experience to our capacity. Not only doing basic or menial things, much as they need to be done, with boredom creeping in sooner than later. Our society lacks a variety of roles in which older people can continue to use and develop their skills. It is up to us to experiment and develop new ones.

Now that I am no longer employed in the paid workforce, I have been looking for new roles through which to connect with (see C above) and to contribute to the world. The greatest gift is perhaps to listen attentively to another. It is rarely that one feels really listened to. I am glad I have learned this skill, though lately I have felt almost burnt out, and deliberately hold myself back. I have a personal 'conflict of interest' about this factor in my own life at present, both wanting to be supportive but also figuring out how to stay separate and not overwhelmed by others' feelings and troubles, and how to listen to myself more, and enjoy myself more. And have more sheer fun. Also, therapeutic counsellors experience structured intimacy, to which we may become somewhat addicted, and miss when we stop doing this work. We may then need to learn to engage in more intimacy with those around us. This may be challenging, requiring new boundary-setting skills in this different context.

Engaging fully in meaningful activity

What is this later stage of life for (Thomas, 1994)? One of the most challenging tasks is to figure out what to do with these extra years. We are the first generation with this opportunity. It may be the longest weekend of our life, and after the usual bucket lists are ticked off, what then? Many have difficulty finding answers to questions like, 'What would I do with my life if I wasn't afraid? What do I *really* want?' They have spent the past few decades fulfilling the requirements of work, family and expectations of others. I ran many two-day workshops with the title 'At Your Age?' in which participants could examine their values and interests in depth.

What really engages me? Following interviews with hundreds of people, in his book *Flow*, Michel Csikszentmihalyi (1990) concluded that their best moments were when

they were absorbed in an activity that taxed their skills and abilities, and made them concentrate so hard that nothing else mattered but the moment.

My passion at present is in exploring positive approaches to older age. Many older people are at a loss to find expression for purpose, mastery and autonomy, according to Pink (2009), who writes about these three top twenty-first-century motivators at work. In older age, we lose our sense of 'agency' so subtly and easily, the sense of being effective, and of having control and choice.

We need a cultural shift from the attainment of personal control and independence as the desired state for maturity to one that supports and even honours the role of an older/elder manager while it is possible and they are still effective, and a valuing of interdependence. As my aunt was dying of cancer, she was somehow able to ask for help with dignity and grace. I hope I can do the same, if and when it is required.

Stages and tasks of older adulthood/elderhood

To get my head around the concept of the possible 30 years ahead of me, I use two ideas. Firstly, I divide the extra 30 years into three stages: early elderhood (or extended adulthood), maturing elderhood, and mature elderhood. Some may even reach a state of what Tornstam (1997) refers to as gerotranscendence. Secondly, I look for clues in suggested developmental life tasks.

The tasks associated with the transition into (early) elderhood include: redefining success; identifying one's meaning of life up to now; creating a positive new identity, or multiple possibilities; continuing to be productive; developing and maintaining energy; and building resilience. Maturing elderhood tasks include: learning to live in tune with one's 'true self'; keeping body, brain, spirit and heart active; managing losses; coming to terms with the reality of growing older and one's own mortality; learning to let go; and seeing the big picture, enjoying each moment. Matured elderhood, and, hopefully, gerotranscendent tasks include: letting go; increasing life satisfaction; becoming at peace with self, other people, the world and the cosmos; and being curious about what's next.

In recent times, wise people have identified such developmental tasks, including Carl Gustav Jung, Jane Wheelwright, Erik and Joan Erikson (Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Erikson et al., 1986) and Lars Tornstam. Before them, Cicero's 44 BC *Essay on Old Age* (Jarcho, 1971) puts these issues into perspective in a down-to-earth way, and made me laugh at how timeless my concerns are.

Reflecting now on the past 10 years, I see that these 'tasks' have guided me more than I have been aware. They make sense because they all logically follow the changes and choices of ageing. I have used some of them to structure and give meaning to my life.

C. G. Jung (1971) writes about how each person's individuation is a lifelong process. I use his compass of psychological types more and more the older I get. As he suggests, I deliberately explore my less preferred mental functions, sensing and thinking, using his theory as a framework for my own learning. The world of the senses is a whole, beautiful world for me to explore, and especially now I have the time to do so. According to Jung, the numinous for me is most likely to be reached through conscious attention to sensing experiences.

This all may sound dreary and less than spontaneous, but I assure you it is proving to be very enriching, this exploring of sides of my self previously undiscovered. If not now,

when? Jung offers a map to do so. His work encourages us – or, at least, me – to explore our Shadow side: the parts, positive and negative, that did not get any light in the earlier half of life because they did not fit our chosen image. Accepting our Shadow is related to another task I have taken on board from my earlier readings, that is, to look at opposites, and how they might be contained under one perspective. It is a natural place to look for me now, as I endeavour to make sense of the world news, for instance. An outrageous phenomenon such as an ignorant upstart who seemed to rise up out of nowhere into power, as one has done recently in the United States, only makes sense when viewed in a much wider socioeconomic and political context.

Another task frequently referred to is the desirability to produce one's 'life review' as a strong story. The process of memoir writing has been eye-opening for me. The process helps me make sense of my life, puts things into perspective and helps to integrate my experiences into a coherent whole, rather than being one random experience after another. This ties in to the need to make meaning of one's life. For instance, after attending a particular workshop, the resulting monthly writing group is not to be missed. However, we agree that this is life writing, and includes our present and future thoughts and experiences, not just our past. So often I am asked, 'What *did* you do … ?' as though I have no present or future – an ageist prompt to be dismissed.

Another focus has been 'to become more at peace with myself and other people' (Tornstam, 1994). My husband of 62 years and I have been exploring our relationship with the help of an imago therapist, resulting in increased understanding and love for each other. I am also keen to be more at peace with myself. I anticipate that life is not going to get easier, and so I want to reduce current stress where possible.

A current challenge

Anxiety, what Cassidy and Rector (2008) refer to as this 'silent geriatric giant', has recently reared its head above the sand. Cassidy notes: 'Older adults are at risk for anxiety disorders. Increasing frailty, medical illness, and losses can contribute to feelings of vulnerability and fear, and can reactivate anxiety disorders' (p. 1). I want to deal with this for several reasons: I seem to be 'burnt out'; I frequently feel overwhelmed by others' troubles; and I have a recurring dream that all I want to do is lie down and sleep, but I can't find anywhere to do so. Recently, the doctor told me that I suffer from anxiety: 'Panic attacks,' she said, 'are what the choking episodes indicate. You can take medication, or maybe you'd rather explore how to manage the anxiety.' It is a puzzle to be solved. Other older people experience it also. I am not alone. And I do want to finish with the frightening choking deal. In response, I am taking a two-pronged approach to this issue.

Firstly, a friend referred me to the extraordinary 'immunity to change process' (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). It is deceptively simple, and yet profoundly powerful. The guided activities enable insights, and a path to understanding and hopefully some freedom from old constraining beliefs and habits that I have held unconsciously for over 80 years. It is as though I have been a child, looking into a glass darkly, and can now catch glimpses of clarity. I have a choice about how to use the resulting release of energy, very welcome at this time when it begins to be at a premium. Currently, I am working through a book, *Right Weight, Right Mind* (Kegan, Lahey, & Helsing, 2016), with one of our daughters, which is a very special privilege and delight. This book focuses on weight loss, but it is applicable to any or all

of life's issues. I am astounded at how I have made a breakthrough into places that have been dark and terrifying for as long as I can remember. I am trying not to get too hopeful and excited – and all without pathologizing anything.

Secondly, I have put together what I know about anxiety and its history in my life. My mother was a very anxious woman. I followed my first little sister, who was stillborn. So, from my earliest moments, I was surrounded by existential anxiety: would I be born alive and would I then survive? I have learned to relax my mouth and throat whenever I notice I am stressed. I have made an appointment to attend the local Anxiety Clinic for Older Adults. I am hopeful that, with help and focus, I will at least make friends with this giant.

The ride

This older age stage is for the strong, wise, skilled and socially supported, not for wimps! There are still many much more challenging 'tasks', including natural challenges, to come to terms with, such as existential issues, like facing into mortality, grief and loss when one of us dies. At the moment, I am enjoying this colourful ride at the beginning of my ninth decade. I count myself fortunate to be accompanied by great friends and family, and my long-time partner, John. I believe I will only be really qualified to write about being 'older and growing' when I am finally on my deathbed, paradoxically when it is too late to do so.

As a professional lifer, I am engaged in the practice of how to live in the best way I can. I am enjoying the privilege of having a long life to become, as Jung (1963) put it, 'who I truly am'.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Margaret Merton, BA, Dip. Guidance, Dip. Teaching, is an experienced and qualified counsellor and trainer. She has worked with professionals for over 20 years in career development and life planning, communication, counselling, and team building. She is passionate about the potential of older people to continue to live full and productive lives well into their sixties, seventies, eighties and longer.

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