

From Age-ing to Sage-ing

A Profound New Vision of Spiritual Eldering

by JULIA BALZER RILEY RN, MN, AHN(C), CET

Have you watched parents or clients struggle with depression in retirement or seen shiny brochures offering a Disney-like experience of aging in perpetual recreation? Seven years ago, as an aging baby boomer, I began looking for role models of successful aging for myself. I met a nurse from Atlanta, Ga., Ann Rinaldi RN, MS, who was beginning to fashion her retirement — paying attention to finances, building new skills for part-time work to supplement her income, and once again pursuing oil painting with passion. Together we discovered the work of Spiritual Eldering®, which I had the opportunity to share with more than 100 attendees at AHNA's 25th annual conference this June.

At this half-day workshop, attendees began to explore the work of Spiritual Eldering. They conducted a life review, examined forgiveness in their own “sage-ing” process, and created a plan for new meaning in the harvest years. Written below, you will discover a few of the topics presented at my workshop. May this information inspire you to imagine a new era of life with meaning.

What is Spiritual Eldering?

Spiritual Eldering is a two-fold process for the journey of positive aging, life review/repair and proactive aging. This process can begin in midlife as we contemplate retirement and transform our concept of “age-ing” as loss and dread to “sage-ing,” a time of harvesting the fruits of life's work, living joyfully and mentoring.

Who is the founder of Spiritual Eldering?

Rabbi Zalman Schachter, a pioneer in Jewish Renewal and schooled in Kabbalah, the mystical wisdom of Judaism, began this transdenominational work 20 years ago at the age of 60. When he began to feel a sense of futility about growing older, death and physical

deterioration, he pursued a vision quest in a secluded cabin. There he consulted the wisdom of other cultures: Sufi masters, Buddhist teachers, Native-American shamans, Catholic monks and transpersonal psychologists. From this experience grew sage-ing — a more joyful vision of aging; the Spiritual Eldering Institute (www.spiritualeldering.org); and a book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* (Schacter, 1995).

What tools are needed?

Contemplative techniques for inner growth — meditation, journaling and life review — help us begin to face mortality. Once we accept death, face our fears and take charge of living more fully, we can focus on what we have to give and how we can make a difference as well as give ourselves permission to experience joy in the moment. As we release attachments, we experience a miraculous sense of discovery, with an extraordinary energy that transcends doing in favor of being. From this spiritual growth comes clarity of consciousness.

How might this happen?

First, we assume responsibility for doing the inner work necessary for continued growth: forgiving ourselves and others, contemplating what we have to offer younger generations, and assuming responsibility for proactively planning for our roles as “elders of our tribe.” Consider the gentle “hanging-out” role of the grandparent or surrogate grandparent who has the time and patience for the “why” questions that often tire parents.

Workshop attendees were able to experience this process through an activity known as “A Testimonial Dinner for the Severe Teachers.” In this exercise, each attendee compiled a list of people who had “done them wrong.” Then, they identified lessons learned from experiences with these people and reframed them as life's “severe teachers.” To evoke a fuller experience, we imagined preparing a celebration to honor these

*Imagine anticipating
a new era of life
with meaning rather
than mourning the
loss of identity of
earlier roles. Imagine
exploring an unmet
dream.*

Applying Spiritual Eldering in an Assisted-Living Setting

Residents at an assisted-living facility were asked, "What is one thing you have learned that you would like to pass on to younger people in your life?" Some of their words of wisdom are listed below:

"Put people first."

"Make a gratitude list."

"Treat everyone equally."

"Have more than one interest in life."

"Be contented. Take one day at a time."

"Don't worry."

The golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

"Seek the Lord with all your heart, your

mind, and your soul."

"Don't tell somebody something if you are not going to do it."

"Give back. Be of service to others."

"Do the best you can and have faith, then things will work out."

"Think before you speak."

"Feel good about life."

"Don't be afraid to work."

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teachers. I asked participants to imagine engraved invitations and an expensive caterer. Next, through journaling or quiet imaginings, we invited these teachers to a gala where we shared lessons learned, thanked them, forgave them and released them. This activity became a freeing experience, but one that put the responsibility for "moving on" squarely on our own shoulders!

After the workshop, participants sought me out to share poignant stories of the forgiveness work they began during the workshop exercises. They talked about how they could use these strategies both in their own lives and to support aging clients. Laughter and tears demonstrated the power of this work.

Why should nurses learn more?

As we begin to rethink our own ideas about aging with anticipation of sage-ing, we become role models who can offer hope to our clients. As we practice holistically, we honor the need for balance between body, mind and spirit to foster healthy aging. Through self-care, we gain first-hand experience of the value of committing time to journal writing, meditation and self-expression. Then we can teach and support the use of these contemplative techniques to enrich lives even when physical challenges limit previous ways of finding meaning.

With elders, we can encourage them to capture stories and explore their creativity in poetry-writing, photography and other arts. We can support letter-writing or making audio or videotapes to express feelings of love or to say unsaid thoughts. For elders residing in an assisted-living facility, having them share "words of wisdom" with younger persons also provides an insightful experience (see box above).

As holistic nurses, we can co-create a healing environment with clients as we embellish our work with our own gifts, talents and life experiences. We can honor aging as a time for leaving a legacy of wisdom, for mentoring younger generations and for spiritual growth... moving from Age-ing to Sage-ing®.

Reference

Schacter, Z. (1995). *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*. New York: Warner.

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