



## The Unique Strengths and Qualities of Older Adults

Elders have some qualities rarely experienced by adults. An elder is not just an older adult anymore than a child is just a young adult. This reality is based upon many years of comprehensive research. For example, unless blockage occurs because of some life trauma, the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung stated that as we age, many of us individuate, meaning moving toward higher consciousness and wholeness. Erik Erikson called the final stage of life ego integrity, a tendency to more readily accept oneself and others, to enhanced life satisfaction and to begin to experience life completion.

Gerontologist Lars Tornstam and his staff at the University of Uppsala in Sweden spent almost 20 years studying people ages 65+. They uncovered the following positive aspects of aging among elders who refused to internalize cultural stereotypes:

- The individual becomes less self-occupied, more accepting of self and others and more interested in the *quality* rather than the quantity of relationships.
- There is a movement toward *life simplification* and enjoyment of *solitude*.
- There is often a feeling of *cosmic communion* with the spirit of the universe and a redefinition of time, space and death.

According to Bill Thomas, MD, founder of Eden Alternative™, an orientation toward *being* is one of the fundamental strengths of many elders. *Being*, as opposed to an adult fixation on *doing* and performance, serves as the foundation for understanding elderhood, especially among the “oldest of the old.” Author Robert Raines describes elderhood as a “time to live” and underscores that as we age, “attention – curiosity, openness of heart and mind, sensitivity to the souls of others, and a capacity to wait – may better suit the season.”

Psychiatric nurse Amy Brown and her partner “adopted” a dear friend named Marilyn who had been diagnosed with some early dementia. “She could sit for hours in the back yard and pet her dogs in a kind of meditative, satisfying simplicity,” Amy affirms. Marilyn’s story serves as an example of some non-performance strengths of experienced humans, such as:

- Enjoying solitude
- Meditating
- Finding pleasure in nature
- Being totally present in the here and now

Granted, not all aging is positive. Common signs of aging may include arthritis, aching backs, hair loss, crow’s feet and diminished mobility. Elders often experience financial difficulties, cognitive decline and loss of family and friends. Nonetheless, learning about the strengths of experienced humans helps care providers to alter cultural ageism and to greatly improve client relations. It is one reason why the American Society on Aging identifies strengths assessment as a five-year strategic initiative, leading to a better acceptance of the aging process.

By James and Linda Henry © 2007

Jim and Linda Henry are authors of four books on soul-oriented health care, the latest entitled *Transformational Eldercare from the Inside Out, Strengths-Based Strategies for Caring* (American Nurses Association, 2007).

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