



Growing Old on Purpose adds to Journey

by Dr. Gary T. Reker

When I was a young boy growing up in post-war Germany, I was driven by a single purpose—to become an adult so that I could get in on all the privileges, the rewards, the "goodies" of adult life. I wanted to understand all the things I was told I wouldn't until I got older. As a young teenager, growing up in rural Canada, and as a member of the Sigma-C boys club of the United Church of Canada, I was very much influenced by a simple motto, "I strive toward my goals."

As a senior high school student and later an undergraduate at McMaster University, I was captivated by Browning's famous line, "Your reach should exceed your grasp or what's a heaven for". This quote profoundly influenced my life, a turning point in my desire to pursue an academic career, and has been the basis of my philosophy of life ever since.

As a young professor in the discipline of psychology, I maintained my main philosophy of life and choose paths, sometimes following in the footsteps of others, sometimes creating my own trail, that took me in a certain direction and gave me the opportunity "to do the best with what I had."

Now as a late middle-aged psychogerontologist, the Browning phrase has evolved into something much deeper and much more comprehensive. "The ultimate meaning of life is to preserve its continuation". So, I continue to strive toward self-growth and to promote the development of others through my research and my writing and finding a great deal of personal satisfaction in the process

As I look back on my life, it's not too difficult to notice a consistent common theme—I grew old on purpose. Each time, when I thought I had reached the ultimate goal, I was surprised to learn that new goals needed to be pursued. Reaching the teen-age years, or young adulthood, or getting the Ph.D. was not the "icing on the cake"; these were merely successive layers of a multi-layered dessert that would require a lifetime to prepare. So, what does the future hold in store for me? I am very optimistic that it will finally be the "icing on my cake", and of course, I'm hoping that there will be plenty of candles, too.

As I began to study the aging process, I soon discovered that I wasn't the only one who had grown old on purpose. In spite of all the negative stereotypes about aging and the emphasis on physical declines, senile dementias, chronic illnesses, etc. in the literature and the popular media in the late 1970s, I found many older adults who maintained very positive moods and attitudes. So, instead of trying to find answers to the question of, "What makes us ill?", I wanted to turn it around and ask, "Why is that given all the stressors, strains, and losses associated with aging, many of us are able to adapt quite well?" This took me on a journey to study the human potential for growth, specifically positive mental attitudes which, on the basis of my personal experiences, had already shown considerable promise. And I am pleased to note that others have taken up the torch to light the way toward a relatively new field in the discipline of psychology; namely, positive psychology.

As I see it, growing old on purpose involves, among other things, two key positive mental attitudes: an optimistic outlook and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. As humans, we possess a remarkably efficient organ—the brain. Our human brain is very complex and different from animals in that we can use symbols such as language to represent reality, we can assign meaning to our experiences, we can reflect back on our past, and we can anticipate future possibilities. In short, humans can contemplate their existence, can anticipate the future, can act with intention, and therefore can grow old "on purpose". I would argue that mental attitudes influence the way we behave, and it is what we do

subsequently, and how we do it, that impacts on our health. However, I would add that positive mental attitudes provide the necessary but not necessarily the sufficient conditions for promoting meaningful living.

In my work with older adults, I found that an optimistic attitude and a sense of meaning and purpose in life contribute to successful aging. A person is aging successfully if he/she is adapting optimally to the changing circumstances of life, even given physical or health-related limitations and challenges. We can all rise above our limitations by seeing the glass as half-full, rather than half-empty; by comparing ourselves favourably to others who are not as fortunate; by finding side benefits in what has happened to us; or by not "sweating the petty things" that might give rise to stress.

My interests in meaning and purpose in life lead to the recent publication of an edited book by Reker and Chamberlain (2000), entitled, "Exploring Existential Meaning: Optimizing Human Development Across the Life Span" (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.). In this book, a number of like-minded psychologists, gerontologists, sociologists, and nursing professionals explore the power of personal meaning in preventing illness, promoting health, and moderating the effects of stress on physical health, mental health, and psychological well-being. The interested reader can find a copy of this book in the Trent University Bookstore on the Symons Campus.

At the end of the day, when all is said and done, it would be nice to be able to sit back, relax, and confirm that one has made the best of the opportunities that life had to offer. For richer, for poorer, in sickness, or in health, the purpose of growing old is to grow old on purpose.

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