

Why Grow Old?

Rethinking Traditional Views of Aging and Connecting with Your Maturing Spirit

Final Project

Spirituality and Aging Certificate Program

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Introduction

Most people have heard the expression, “Growing old is not for sissies,” and it’s difficult to deny if you are personally experiencing the effects of aging or are close to someone who is. However, I have found in dealing with older friends and relatives as well as working with older adults for the past several years that many people do try to deny that they are aging and one day will die because they perceive those realities as too frightening or painful to explore. One example of this is found in our first assignment for the Spirituality and Aging Certificate program in which we asked two older adults about their thoughts on aging, dying, and spirituality. During my interview with Joyce, I discovered a person who outwardly appeared to be coping with aging well but was in fact quite frightened by the thought of aging and dying, which manifested itself in significant denial of both. She also seemed somewhat uncertain of what her spiritual beliefs were though she had always been very involved with her church. Not really knowing what her core beliefs were certainly contributed to fearing the unknown and her decision to think about aging and death as little as possible. Based on my experiences with other seniors she is not alone in taking this approach. However, since growing old and dying are realities for all of us, it seems a healthier approach for the aging individual, their friends, and relatives would be to embrace the process, seeking to discover its benefits in living a mindful, meaningful life while fully acknowledging the difficulties, which for most includes gracefully transitioning from this life to whatever awaits us when our physical bodies cease to function. This is, of course, easier said than done.

For most people these are deeply personal, emotional issues infused with mystery, which regardless of a person’s spiritual orientation prompt questions about the meaning of our existence. Since the spirit must make this metaphysical journey within the context of life in the physical world, I believe any program that aims to help older adults wrestling with these matters must include intellectual, emotional, social, vocational, and physical, as well as spiritual components in order to be truly effective. Spirituality should in fact be the netting that binds these other elements together, but in ways that

resonate with both theistic and non-theistic belief systems. Fun and laughter should also be considered key components in as many of the program's activities as possible, and while the serious nature of some spiritual work may not be conducive to laughter, it should ultimately result in greater happiness and fulfillment.

With these ideas in mind, I have designed a program called *Why Grow Old?* that will provide a framework for facilitating spiritual growth for our residents, their families, and our staff, while helping to improve the overall quality and engagement level of our programs. For individuals who already have a healthy, well-established connection to their spirituality in whatever forms it takes, this program will seek to help them nurture those core beliefs while potentially opening their minds to other modes of spirituality that may enrich their lives and provide new avenues for expression. For those who have yet to discover their core beliefs, the program will provide opportunities for such discovery through exposure to a variety of world views and ideas for exploring and expressing spirituality in their own unique ways. In either case, one form of this expression will be volunteer service of some kind that will positively impact Royal Oaks programs—whatever is most meaningful to the participant. By facilitating spiritual growth opportunities and involvement in meaningful, enjoyable activities that reflect a growing inner maturity, this program will hopefully open pathways to acknowledgement and a healthy acceptance of aging, dying, and death. Gay Luce, in her book *Longer Life, More Joy*, says that old age “is a time to discover inner richness for self-development and spiritual growth. It is also a time for transition and preparation for dying, which is at least as important as preparation for a career or family. Out of this time of inner growth come our sages, healers, prophets, and models for generations to follow.” The *Why Grow Old?* program outlined here will seek to help residents of Royal Oaks, a continuing care senior living community where I work as the Resident Program & Wellness Director, to find and foster their core beliefs and provide opportunities for acting on them in fun and meaningful ways.

Program Themes

The *Why Grow Old?* program is based on personal knowledge gained through working with older adults for the past several years, enhanced significantly by the teachings of the Spirituality and Aging Certificate courses. Some of the themes the program will explore include: Looking Inward and Reaching Outward (reflection, being/doing, meaningful activity); Giving and Receiving (care, knowledge, dependence vs. interdependence, intergenerational interaction); exposure to different ideas about Aging and Dying (great thinkers, philosophers, prophets); Value vs. Vigor (nurturing inner growth, physical and cognitive decline vs. emotional and spiritual ripening, acceptance of outward limitations); Imparting Knowledge (passing on history, shaping and sustaining culture through stories of personal experiences to help fulfill the individual's need to be recognized and heard before leaving this earth and to contribute to society).

Mission Statement

This mission statement for the *Why Grow Old?* program was created using the Koepke Development Model found in *Ministering to Older Adults: The Building Blocks* and demonstrated during Course 4. *We will strive to help Royal Oaks residents determine what's most meaningful in their lives through practices such as reflection and personal storytelling to facilitate a mindset of graceful aging by putting this information to use through creating and participating in programs that enhance their own well-being as well as that of other residents, family members, and the community as a whole.*

Program Goals

1. Help older adults (specifically Royal Oaks residents) identify and nurture what's meaningful in their lives
 - a. Deepen spiritual connections through reflection and guided discussion
 - b. Identify and nurture core beliefs and comforting spiritual traditions
 - c. Find outlets for spiritual/meaningful expressions of what's important to them

- d. Help them see some of the upsides of aging and experience more happiness
 - e. Help them acknowledge and make peace with some of the downsides of aging
 - f. Gently encourage thinking about aging, dying, and death and the potential impact they have on living a mindful and meaningful life
2. Provide opportunities for residents undergoing this process to enrich and refine existing Royal Oaks (RO) programs as well as create new ones to better meet their spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and vocational needs
 3. Actively engage more RO residents in on-campus and off-campus activities including the *Why Grow Old?* program itself to enhance individual and community well-being and increase the pool of regular RO volunteers

Introductory Presentation and Discussion

Utilizing our usual communication channels at Royal Oaks (intranet, newsletter, flyers, in-house TV and phone announcements) we will publicize and hold an introductory gathering for the *Why Grow Old?* program that will include a slide presentation and group discussion followed by light refreshments to encourage socializing. Engaging music (either light classical or songs from the 1940s and 50s) will be playing in the background as people are gathering and during the socializing segment towards the end. The slideshow, presented and expounded upon by the *Why Grow Old?* Coordinator, will give participating residents, family members, and staff a clear understanding of the program's goals and initial components. The discussion following, facilitated by the program coordinator or a resident interested in helping to administrate the program, will include audience questions and suggestions for building on the ideas and activities presented for achieving the program's goals. Ideally, 20 to 30 residents, family members, and staff (hopefully 3 to 5 in addition to the program coordinator) will attend this initial gathering.

Going Deeper

Participants in the initial gathering as well as any others who have become interested in the program in the meantime will be invited to attend and contribute to monthly follow-up presentations to more deeply explore the themes introduced at the initial gathering. These presentations may include guest speakers who are expert in their field which may be residents, staff, or outside professionals such as the instructors of the Spirituality and Aging Certificate Program and will be followed by group discussion. Towards the end of each discussion we will use an easel with a large tablet to list a few existing RO programs that pertain to the topic and how they might be enhanced by what was learned/discussed during the meeting, as well as ideas for new programs. This process is in line with Richard Gentzler's suggestions for successful programs and projects found in *Designing an Older Adult Ministry*, which include "...continually use older adults in your planning process" to get input from those that the program is designed to serve. We will then ask for volunteers to work on enhancing existing or creating new programs and to think about other residents, family members, or staff who might be interested in contributing. If no participants volunteer to work on proposed enhancements or new ideas, we will keep a record of those ideas as possibilities for future programs which may be reintroduced at a later date, but no further action will be taken at that time. The premise here is that if participants aren't enthusiastic enough to be part of the programs they are suggesting, the likelihood of their engaging others in those activities is low. This process will help us weed out ideas that don't generate excitement and foster commitment, allowing us to focus our energy on a fewer number of highly engaging programs that do.

Examples of Program Enhancement

We currently offer a resident-taught class that encourages participants to think about and focus on what's most meaningful in their lives so they can work to achieve goals aligned with those values. This is precisely the type of program we want for helping elders grow spiritually and become more involved in

our community doing work that's important to them. The problem is that attendance has decreased over the past couple of years. One idea I have for increasing attendance of this class is to give a clearer picture of the course's content and goals when announcing that a new class is forming. Currently, the name of the class is about the only information given. While this is one idea for increasing interest, the *Why Grow Old?* program participants will be the main force for suggesting changes through the process described in the previous section. The name of the class and the challenge of low attendance will be written on a large tablet to be brainstormed by the group towards the end of a monthly gathering, and volunteers to work on improving the program will hopefully come forth. The theme for that gathering may be "Looking Inward and Reaching Outward," as noted in the Introduction and would highlight reflection, being vs. doing and the ways they interact, and translating the discovery or refinement of core beliefs into meaningful work. The hope would be that those volunteering to help increase program attendance will become interested in attending the class and encourage others to do so as well. Attending the aforementioned class gives participants tools for growing spiritually so they can be more effective in doing what's most important to them, and since that is exactly what we want this program to do it is in our best interest to try and increase participation in this existing program.

Another example of a Royal Oaks program that has shown some success in achieving its goal of bringing different generations together to relate to and learn from each other is our Glendora High School Tech Connection meeting. Currently, the students come to Royal Oaks monthly to help our residents with their computer and other electronic device problems, but the interaction is somewhat one-sided. An improvement I would like to see in terms of fully achieving our goal of intergenerational giving and receiving is more giving from the senior side of the equation. As part of their club service to seniors, the students also offer email (or pen and ink) pen pals from their membership, but only a few of our residents take advantage of this offer, which would not only allow them to become more proficient using computers and learn more about this younger generation but would also give the residents a

chance to be mentors to these students. Think of the stories they could tell about their days in high school during WWII and other life lessons they would be able to share either through the pen pal program or by giving a ten-minute talk at the beginning of one of our Tech Connection meetings. Again, *Why Grow Old?* participants will be asked about their ideas for enhancements to this existing program at the end of a monthly gathering, probably with the theme of Giving and Receiving which would explore issues such as different ways of giving and receiving, advantages of intergenerational interaction, and independence vs. interdependence. This process will hopefully result in increased participation in the Tech Connection program by both *Why Grow Old?* participants and other residents they encourage to attend. The potential for spiritual development through intellectual and social interaction is high for both the seniors and the students who are participating.

Other existing programs that could use a boost are Bocce Ball, Bingo, Craft Classes, and our Learning for Life Video series. All will be put before the *Why Grow Old* group to suggest improvements or possibly discontinuing programs that no longer interest the majority of our residents.

Examples of New Program Creation

One critical component of *Why Grow Old?* is giving participants the opportunity to tell their stories. I have observed that this is a deep need most older adults have as part of reflecting on their lives and reconciling the reality of aging and dying. Since I began working at Royal Oaks, I have helped several of our residents tell important, life-defining stories by assisting them with outlines and notes of their tales, creating PowerPoint presentations of their old photographs that illustrate them, and setting a time and place for other residents (usually more than 50) to come and hear them. One of those people was a pilot during WWII who spent years in a German POW camp. Another was a Latvian refugee who escaped with his mother to a camp where they lived during the majority of WWII until they could emigrate to Australia after the war. These are just two examples of the amazing stories that needed to be told for the benefit of the tellers and the community at large, most of whom also lived through WWII and have

their own stories to tell from that time. All people want to know that their lives matter in the larger scheme of things, that they contributed to humanity in some way, and that they will not be completely forgotten when they die. To help make storytelling a fixture of our programs here at Royal Oaks, I want to start a class called My Life Matters: Storytelling to Soothe the Soul that will enable people to record salient milestones in their lives through writing, videotaping, or live presentations as previously described. This program may be proposed at a monthly gathering with a theme of Imparting Knowledge, exploring ideas such as passing on history, shaping and sustaining culture through stories of personal experiences to help fulfill the individual's need to be known and heard before leaving this earth as well as contributing to the body of human knowledge. Putting those stories together will involve retrieving memories and hopefully reflection on what transpired. Through that process participants can think about what was learned (by them or others) during those events and how they might see or do things differently knowing what they do now. Once again, we hope to open doors through which our residents can find meaning and purpose that affects how they conduct the remainder of their lives.

Another idea I would like to see blossom into a consistent program at Royal Oaks is a Healthy Grieving and Healing Group which would meet as frequently as the group decided and would provide a forum and support network for those who have experienced significant losses such as the death of loved ones, a terminal diagnosis for themselves, the ability to see well or to walk, or even a recent move to a senior living community from a home they lived in for over 50 years. Reading and discussion may include works by Maria Dancing Heart Hoagland, author of *The Last Adventure of Life: Inspiring Approaches to Living and Dying* and perhaps a guest appearance by Maria to lead a group session in working through losses. Other new program possibilities might be an Exploring New Interests Book Club, a Meditation and Contemplative Practice Class, a Hands-on Help in the Community Group, just to name a few. During the monthly gatherings that take place as the *Why Grow Old?* program progresses, the participants will give

us many more ideas that may turn into vital programs if there is enough interest and commitment to make them thrive. These may replace existing programs that no longer meet our residents' needs.

Measures of Program Effectiveness

A program that seeks to raise spiritual awareness in older adults to help them live more mindful and meaningful lives requires both qualitative and quantitative measures to determine its effectiveness over time. These measures will include but not be limited to

- High participation in the *Why Grow Old Program?* (20 or more residents to start, increasing to 30 or more during the first program cycle)
- Participants start thinking about some of the advantages of growing older and ways it can help them lead happier, more purpose-driven lives. Instead of counting the days, they think in terms of making each day count.
- Participants look forward to attending monthly *Why Grow Old?* gatherings as determined from follow-up calls and conversations
- Participants show interest in the topics explored during the presentations and group discussions, exhibit clear understanding of the concepts, and are able to think of ways they may be applied in their own lives or in RO programs
- Participants tell their friends and family about the *Why Grow Old?* program and encourage them to attend the monthly gatherings as well as some of the activities improved or created through the program
- Participants volunteer to assess existing programs and think about how they might be enhanced (ideally, three to four programs improved during in the first cycle) as well as help to create new programs based on topics discussed at monthly gatherings.
- Participants volunteer to create new programs (ideally, at least two to three programs created in the first cycle) based on topics discussed at the gatherings

- Participants are committed to making positive changes that help foster excitement both at Royal Oaks and in the community with these results:
 - Programs will better reflect the needs and preferences of our residents
 - Residents who create or help shape new and existing programs are more likely to participate and encourage others to do so (actual number of participants and projected increases in participation will depend on the type of activity)
 - Vibrant, well-attended activities will generate buzz and help to attract new residents
- Participants begin volunteering more either at Royal Oaks or in the local community, increasing resident, family, and staff engagement and our core volunteer pool (i.e., from approximately 15 people to 25 or more)
- The *Why Grow Old?* Coordinator will receive requests to repeat the program from residents, family members, or staff who heard about it from the original participants

Concluding Thoughts

By combining what I've learned through working with older adults as Resident Program & Wellness Director of Royal Oaks for the past several years with the material covered in the Spirituality and Aging Certificate Program, I set out to design a program that helps seniors and those who are close to them answer the question, "Why Grow Old?" Our society tends to focus on the downsides of aging, even characterizing it as some kind of terminal illness to be avoided at all costs, while in reality it is part of living a full life as a human being and its ultimate result—death—is the natural conclusion to that unique life experience. I hope to influence older people and those in their lives to think differently about aging, dying, and death through the *Why Grow Old?* program. In implementing its different facets, I will be presenting and utilizing ideas from some of the great thinkers on this subject such as Rabbi Zalman Shalomi-Schacter, who says that "Elderhood offers us the wonderful opportunity to complete our lives triumphantly," and Richard Rohr who says, "The soul has many secrets...One of the best kept secrets,

and yet one hidden in plain sight, is that the way up is the way down. Or, if you prefer, the way down is the way up,” referring to the potential for ascension of the spirit and intellect (wisdom) against the backdrop of the physical decline that comes with aging. Finally, with respect to discovering and manifesting our purpose in life, Deepak Chopra says, “Everyone has a purpose in life...a unique gift or special talent to give to others. And when we blend this unique talent with service to others, we experience the ecstasy and exultation of our own spirit, which is the ultimate goal of all goals.”

It seems unlikely that all of these great thinkers would be mistaken about the importance of spiritual maturity, or “ripening” as William Thomas refers to it, when it comes to living a fulfilling life as we age. I look forward to working with the residents, families, and staff at Royal Oaks to see if what I’m proposing can help people be happier and more satisfied with how they live in their later years and how it impacts the overall quality and engagement in programs that benefit individuals and the community as a whole.

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