

The Secret of Life Rev. Bonnie Dlott

Last year my Women's group read a book called "Aging as a Spiritual Practice" by Lewis Richmond. Richmond is a Zen Buddhist Priest who became interested in the ways that meditation techniques can be used to reframe the experience of aging as a time of peace and tranquility. The book got me thinking about aging, and some broader questions about the whole experience. I recalled a line from a James Taylor tune called, "The Secret O'Life;" he sings

The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time
Any fool can do it
There ain't nothing to it
Nobody knows how we got to
The top of the hill
But since we're on our way down
We might as well enjoy the ride

It was easy for him to say; He wasn't even 30 when he wrote that song. But even though I was just a teenager when I first heard it, I felt like he might be on to something important. Now, thirty-five years later, I'm wondering, is there such a thing as "THE Secret of Life?" Is there some magic formula of love, success, physical and mental health that holds the key? Is there some optimal way to balance self-indulgence and self-care? We've all heard those stories about extremely health conscious people who keel over in their forties, and others who smoke, drink, and party into their nineties. Clearly, longevity is not simply a matter of clean living.

Social scientists have long been interested in the psychological factors that contribute to long, happy lives. How is it that some people travel the world, found charitable organizations, and run marathons well into their eighties, while others live out their days mired in disappointment and regret? Shakespeare famously wrote about aging, "And so, from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, and then from hour to hour we rot and rot." (As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7) But clearly, some of us rot faster than others. Why is that?

I recently came across an interesting study, called the Study of Adult Development, described in a book called "Aging Well" by George Vaillant. The study, which was funded by Harvard Medical School, looked at the basic elements of adult development in a group of individuals over time, from childhood up to age 80. The goal of the study was to find out why and how people live happily into old age. I found much of the results of the study to be predictable, but some of the findings surprised me, particularly in the area of religion and spirituality.

The studies, which began in 1937, were done with three cohorts, or groups; one was a group of over two hundred physically and mentally healthy Harvard College sophomores; another was a group of over 300 inner-city Boston boys, and a third included 90 young women from the SF Bay Area who had been judged to be gifted as children. Individuals from all three cohorts had been born between 1910 and 1930.

Information was gathered initially by personal interviews, as well as interviews with parents and teachers. Throughout the years, additional interviews and medical examinations were done at regular intervals with each cohort. Information was gathered about their mental and physical health, career enjoyment, retirement experience and marital life. The goal of the study was to identify predictors of healthy aging.

The beauty of longitudinal studies such as this one is that like wine, they become more interesting with age. As the Harvard cohort entered middle age in the 60's many achieved dramatic success. Four members of the group ran for the U.S. Senate. One served in a presidential Cabinet, and one became president; (John F. Kennedy) another was a best-selling novelist. There were failures as well. By 1948, 20 members of the group displayed severe psychiatric difficulties. By age 50, almost a third of the men suffered from some degree of mental illness.

Perhaps you have heard the story of a father who on Christmas Eve puts into one son's stocking an expensive gold watch, and into another son's, a pile of horse manure. The next morning, the first boy comes to his father and says sadly, "Dad, I just don't know what I'll do with this watch. It's so fragile, I'm afraid I'll break it." The other boy runs to him and says, "Daddy! Daddy! Santa left me a pony, if only I can just find it!" This story brings me to Vaillant's book about the Adult Development Study. His central question is not how much or how little trouble his subjects encountered, but rather precisely how—and to what effect—they responded to that trouble.

Before I get into the results of the study, I need to talk a little bit about the author's model of adult development, which consists of six sequential tasks. (Summarized on pg. 45-58) Vaillant was a student of psychologist Erik Erickson, who used data from the same study to develop his famous stages of development during the 1940's. Vaillant expanded Erickson's adult development stages or tasks, adding one for a total of seven.

The first stage a young adult passes through is called *Identity*, in which one separates from parents. Completion of this task signals the shift from childhood into independent adulthood.

The second stage for a young adult is called *Intimacy*. This task is accomplished when an individual becomes reciprocally involved with a partner in some committed fashion.

Next is *Career Consolidation*. In this task, an individual finds a career that is both valuable to society and to him or herself. (anyone still on that task?) Vaillant distinguishes a career from a "job" by the following criteria; contentment, compensation, competence, and commitment. A person who has mastered this task has assumed a social identity within the world of work.

The next task is called *Generativity*, and this step that comes up a lot in the study. In this task, an individual reaches beyond their own family, embracing a broader circle through which one cares for the next generation. Vaillant writes, "Generativity reflects the capacity to give the self—finally completed through the mastery of the first three tasks of adult development—away. . . . Generativity means community building." (pg. 47) Examples would be someone who becomes a counselor, a guide, a consultant, or a coach to younger adults. He calls the work of the Generativity task "empathetic leadership."

The fifth stage is called *The Keeper of Meaning*. In this task, an individual shifts

from mentoring individuals to caring about justice in a larger sense. Vaillant writes, “The focus of a Keeper of Meaning is on conservation and preservation of the collective products of mankind—the culture in which one lives and its institutions—rather than the development of its children.” (pg. 48). The shift from Generativity to Keeper of Meaning in part is a function of increased experience, but it also has to do with decreasing physical stamina. It takes much less energy to be a caretaker than to be a caregiver. Vaillant writes, “Being generative is more likely to win us love than being a justice. We love and we need our partisan managers and our team captains; but we shout ‘kill the umpire!’ Referees and judges need thick skins and gray hairs in order to survive. Thus, the passage from Generativity to Keeper of Meaning may be difficult for those who wish the cheering crowd. Being needed, however, is a luxury that the young allow the middle-aged, but it is a luxury that wise grandparents, and certainly wise great-grandparents, learn to relinquish.” (pg. 144) This stage is one of patience, of seeing both or all sides of an issue, of being less influenced by personal stories and more influenced by a larger cultural picture.

The last task is called *Integrity or Integration*. This is the time in our lives when we come to understand our place in the world and the life we have lived in it. The task is to accept of the inevitability of one’s own death, and maintain concern and gratitude for life itself, in spite of the decline of our own individual body and mind. Bluntly, Vaillant writes, “successful aging means the mastery of decay.” (pg. 159)

I think that mastery of the stage of Integrity is best illustrated by some quotes from study participants who reached their eighties. When asked about her goals for the future, one woman wrote that she was satisfied with the contributions she had already made. “Some of us are happy and content to sit and chew our cud like so many Carnation cows . . . our ability to face up to situations and our capabilities of handling emergencies without panic may also be a gift not to be ignored.” (pg. 161) When asked if he would share any wisdom he had gathered during his lifetime, another answered, “I think it is enormously important to the next generation that we be happy into old age—happy and confident—not necessarily that we are right but that it is wonderful to persist in our search for meaning and rectitude. Ultimately, that is our most valuable legacy—the conviction that life is and has been worthwhile right up to the limit.” (pg. 161) Vaillant felt that poet Hans Zinsser, who died of leukemia at the age of 62, best captured the stage of Integrity in his last sonnet:

Nor does death leap upon me unaware
Like some wild beast that hungers for its prey
But gives me kindly warning to prepare:
Before I go, to kiss your tears away . . .
How sweet the summer! And the autumn shone
Late warmth within our hearts as in the sky
Ripening rich harvests that our love had sown.
How good that ‘ere the winter comes, I die!
Then ageless, in your heart I’ll come to rest
Serene and proud, as when you loved me best.

(pg. H. Zinsser, *As I Remember Him*, Boston: Little Brown, 1940).

These are Vaillant’s stages of adult development: Identity, Intimacy, Career Consolidation, Generativity, Keeper of Meaning, and Integrity. Vaillant is careful not to

characterize one stage of development as more virtuous than another. Not all of us reach the last stage in our lifetime, and there is no judgment in that. But the stages are useful as a kind of road map that allow us to locate and identify “successful” aging strategies.

In each of the three groups of the Adult Development Study, accomplishing the tasks in the stage of Generativity proved to be the best predictor of happiness in old age. You will recall that the tasks of this stage involve taking care of other individuals, particularly those in one’s family. Consider this quote from a 76 year old Harvard participant who had one of the “sunniest outlooks of life in the entire study.” He wrote: “I have been greatly blessed. I had an incredibly happy childhood, school years, college years and career. I loved my own business, I love my five children and both wives . . . Sure my father was an alcoholic, but I loved him and stuck with him and helped him into AA. I’m sure I could drum up some problems but I guess I forgot them. I don’t give a damn if I am remembered for anything. I’ve enjoyed my life and had a hell of a good time. I’m most proud of those times I helped others.” (pg. 114)

In general, the stage of Generativity involves caring relationships within an “inner circle” of family, friends, work, and social groups like churches. It involves giving of oneself, often to the next generation. This stage is summarized well by John Kotre in his book *Outliving the Self*; “To invest one’s substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self.” (J. Kotre, *Outliving the Self*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, pg. 10) People in this stage are highly invested in the lives of their children, their siblings, extended families, and individuals in their communities. They are teachers, coaches, hospital or library volunteers, and they do work that Vaillant describes as “hopeful.”

Besides reaching the stage of Generativity, what specific qualities or factors allow people to thrive as they grow old? By the time the Harvard cohort had entered retirement, Vaillant, who had then been following them for a quarter century, had identified a half-dozen or so major factors that predict healthy aging, both physically and psychologically. Some were predictable, having to do with lifestyle, such as not smoking, not abusing alcohol, being physically active, and maintaining a healthy weight. A love of life-long learning and the ability to create and play were also characteristics seen in his elderly well subjects.

Over and above these lifestyle and health issues were attitudes. As Vaillant says himself, “Old age is more than beer and skittles.” (pg. 60) Moving successfully from one stage of adulthood to the next requires accepting a tremendous amount of change. Perhaps not surprisingly, it turns out that the presence of certain coping strategies is a strong predictor that one will live contentedly into old age. One such strategy, which Vaillant calls “sublimation,” involves the ability to reframe experiences. An example would be someone who looks back on an unhappy childhood and appreciates the gifts of strength and self-reliance that came of it. This is the famous “lemonade from lemons” phenomenon. Another is humor, which eases pain by transforming it into “the ridiculous.” Yet a third is altruism, the ability to find pleasure in helping others. The last is the ability to postpone gratification; not to give up on it entirely, just to wait for it.

Of the 106 Harvard men who had five or six of these physical or psychological factors in their favor at age 50, half ended up at 80 as what Vaillant called “happy-well” and only 7.5 percent as “sad-sick.” Meanwhile, of the men who had three or fewer of these factors at age 50, none ended up “happy-well” at 80. Even if they had been in

average physical shape at 50, the men who had three or fewer protective factors were three times as likely to be dead at 80 as those with four or more factors.

What factors didn't turn out to matter? Here were some surprises. Cholesterol levels at age 50 had nothing to do with health in old age. Ancestral longevity did not correlate with successful aging either. Having a happy childhood did not correlate; it seems that what goes right in childhood predicts the future far better than what goes wrong. The predictive importance of childhood temperament also diminished over time: by age 70, shy, anxious children were just as likely as the outgoing kids to be characterized as "happy-well."

What about religion and spirituality? Good question. Vaillant had to define these concepts before he could evaluate their value in healthy aging, and so in the briefest terms, he describes religion as an exclusive faith, one that "draws a circle that keeps others out" using creeds and doctrine. Spirituality is a faith of inclusion, one that draws a circle that includes in it the whole of creation, and it involves feelings and experiences. (pg. 260) The study showed that the presence or absence of either religious adherence or spirituality had almost no association with successful aging. This surprised me, as well as Vaillant, who freely admitted he went looking for increased spirituality in his happy older subjects. He has a lot of trouble accepting this, concluding the chapter by stating that even though he did not find any correlation, "spirituality *should* deepen in old age for all of us." Why? He writes, "Growing older does alter the conditions of life in ways that are conducive to spirituality. Aging slows us down and provides us time and peace to smell life's flowers. Aging simplifies our daily routine and facilitates the acceptance of the things we cannot change. Aging banks our instinctual fires and increases our capacity to be internally quiet. . . Aging focuses us toward becoming one with the ultimate ground of all being. Aging allows us to feel part of the ocean." (pg. 278) In other words, aging offers us the opportunity to deepen spiritually and grow in wisdom, but there is no evidence that doing so will result in a longer, happier life.

Is anyone else here disturbed that I just informed you that religion and spirituality are not a relevant factor in living a long, happy life? I did say that, but I did NOT say that you should stop coming to church, so sit back down. In an interview in the March 2008 newsletter to his Harvard Study subjects, Vaillant was asked, "What have you learned?" Vaillant's response: "That the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people." (Joshua Shenk, *The Atlantic Magazine*, June 2009, "What Makes Us Happy.")

I would conclude today by arguing that this Fellowship is a place where those relationships can be found and fostered. In this place our young people are encouraged to find their identity. A few lucky ones among us have found intimacy here. This is a place where Generativity is practiced, as we care for our children and for each other. We become Keepers of Meaning as we pass on the Unitarian Universalist tradition. And we admire and honor those who have achieved integration, and learn from each who passes from our midst into the light. Here we remember, and we will be remembered.

George Vaillant ends his book with an excerpt of the EB White's children's book, *Stuart Little*. Stuart tells his children friends to remember three important rules: "Be a true friend. Do the right thing. Enjoy the glory of everything." I would add James Taylor's advice: "We might as well enjoy the ride." May it be so.