

**Creative Longevity:
Essays on Aging and
Wisdom**

**A publication of
Creative Longevity and
Wisdom**



**A project of
The Institute for Social Innovation
at
Fielding Graduate University
Santa Barbara, CA**

Preface

February 2008

**By Dudley Tower, PhD, Creative Longevity and Wisdom Alumnus Fellow,
Valerie Malhotra Bentz, Professor, School of Human & Organization
Development, Fielding Graduate University, and Katrina Rogers, Professor,
School of Human & Organization Development, Fielding Graduate University**

The New Millennium has brought with it a focus on the “positive” in many fields and professions central to Fielding Graduate University. “Positive psychology” is an attempt to get away from the emphases on mental illness and weaknesses of the mind. “Positive organization development” emphasizes theory and practices representing the very best of the human condition. While this emphasis on the positive finds its way into the curriculum and practices of Fielding’s traditional education programs, there is a new and growing area of interest for all its students that must simultaneously be addressed on an interdisciplinary basis within the Fielding community: “positive aging.”

The need for this new area of expertise arises from what is perhaps the most significant demographic trend to occur in the past quarter century—the rapid escalation in population of people over age 60. While there is currently very little factual data about how an aging population will change social institutions, it is our belief this trend will create a wide array of new possibilities for senior adults—as well as for the society we live in. Fielding Graduate University, because of its 35-year leadership in the field of adult education and development, is uniquely suited to train the necessary cadre of mature leaders who, through their knowledge and wisdom, can reinvigorate our society’s increasingly conflicted business and social institutions. Such leadership is also necessary to preserve the knowledge, arts, values, and humanity that our society was built upon. This is the purpose of the Fielding Graduate University’s Creative Longevity and Wisdom Project: to become a worldwide leader of interdisciplinary and holistic research and practice focused on the unique positive opportunities and challenges associated with an aging population.

The Evolution of Aging Theory

With increases in a healthy life span, many individuals will now be experiencing an additional 10 to 20 years of potentially vibrant and productive life. This trend runs counter to most of our society’s images and theories of aging. Early theories stressed “disengagement,” “biomedical decrement,” and other negative aspects of the aging process. It was believed that as people reached conventional retirement age, they began a gradual process of social withdrawal and physical degradation. Their importance to society was ebbing, and their new purpose was to reflect on life and prepare for death. In the 1960s, a new theory began to emerge. “Activity theory” was based on the assumption that older people should be assimilated and mainstreamed into society and was inspired by the human potential movement with its ideas about self-actualization, personal growth, and empowerment. This theory met with a certain amount of social resistance, but it awakened many seniors to the fact that there might be a life after retirement. It was not until the 1980s that the concept of a “Third Age” was born, where it became recognized that for the first time in history there was a large group of adults whose existence was defined neither by work nor illness but by an opportunity to use discretionary time and money for any purpose they chose. This view recognized the continuing developmental potential for a large segment of older people living well above the poverty level and having unprecedented levels of school completion. These demographic factors, combined with modern medical advancements, would allow a large proportion of older people an additional 10 to 20 years of good health and the opportunity to do something with their lives not available to previous generations.

Theories of “successful aging” have continued to evolve since the 1980s. These theories tend to take a positive developmental look at the aging process, consider the spiritual possibilities for an aging person having the time and inclination, and recognize the potential we have to redefine the aging process in positive terms. For instance, Jepson and Labouvie-Vief (1992) successfully refuted historical cognitive research indicating extensive and irreversible deficits in information

processing as a natural part of aging. They were able to show that seniors actually undergo qualitative changes in how they process information—shifting more from the use of formal systems (concrete, verifiable, and external propositions) in youth to increasingly relative, symbolic, and broader systems of thought. These changes are actually integrative rather than regressive and can be considered a positive aspect of the aging process. Several other studies have also discovered positive changes that are age related. For instance, many seniors develop a more nuanced sense of right and wrong, have a greater tolerance for ambiguity and paradox in moral reasoning and a greater detachment from narrow cultural views, and grow to develop feelings of connection and communion with others and the universe.

Other areas of expertise have also contributed to where we are today in our understanding of positive aging. For example, we are now aware of the health benefits of religious practices and participation in faith communities. We have also seen an expansion of yoga, meditation, comparative religion, mysticism, Eastern spiritual traditions, and self-development. And finally, we have seen a recent rise in the acceptance of deconstruction and critical theories demonstrating that aging is largely a “social construction”—heavily influenced by how the medical, political, and cultural discourses depict growing old. These theories indicate that if we have historically socially constructed a negative view of aging, we now have an opportunity to reconstruct a view that is more realistic and positive in its depiction of the aging process.

Positive Aging and the Role of the Fielding Graduate University

In the 35-year history of the Fielding Graduate University, we have continually placed knowledge in the context of service to the greater community. Our graduate degrees and certificate programs are values based and exemplify the adult learning model: a self-directed form of learning that is significantly more values driven and therefore more effective with mature students. Fielding has pioneered the concept of the “scholar-practitioner,” creating over the years literally thousands of knowledge-based practitioners in the fields of business, government, psychology, medicine, education, nonprofit, and other social institutions. In the course of their education, our scholar-practitioners come to a deeper understanding of their authentic selves, along with mastering skills of leading, healing, transforming, educating, and building collaborative relationships within and between organizations and society. We have opened our epistemological doors to include ways of learning and being from the world’s cultures; to ancient wisdoms as well as postmodern and critical theory. At Fielding, we place knowledge in the context of service, drawing attention to issues of sustainability, inequality, and social change. Fielding graduates are scholar-practitioners who are themselves lifelong learners, adaptable to changing conditions, systemic in their thinking, and motivated by values and issues of social concern.

At Fielding, we approach the cultivation of wisdom in aging with humility. Age does not necessarily correlate with an increase in wisdom, and we at Fielding do not claim to have all the wisdom that will be required to successfully renew our conflicted social institutions. However, we do have the proven ability to create communities of learners—scholar-practitioners who understand the need to first activate wisdom learning and action within themselves. Once this process emerges in the individual, these new wisdom leaders will be qualified to lead, coach, and mentor others in order to develop organizations and other institutions that support the growth of wisdom throughout our society.

The Fielding Creative Longevity and Wisdom Project

The Creative Longevity and Wisdom Project began in 2004 due to the generosity of Dr. Frank Jankovitz, who was inspired by his life's work of promoting the arts among the elderly. We began the project in recognition of the need for the Fielding Graduate University's School of Human & Organization Development to focus on the special opportunities and challenges of an aging population. It has since grown to become an interdisciplinary endeavor, receiving participation from all the other schools within the Fielding community. It is the intent of the project to model positive aging by strengthening, demonstrating, and emphasizing the positive benefits of growing older. The project reaches out through academia, medical services, corporations, social programs, and laymen, with new research initiatives, online and face-to-face academic offerings, publications, and events/workshops. The CL&W Project will offer Fielding alumni and students the unique opportunity to grow in their own life span development while making meaningful contributions to this new direction.

Our Mission

We aim to become a worldwide leader of interdisciplinary research and practice focused on the unique positive opportunities and challenges associated with an aging population.

Our Goals

1. To educate leaders—who themselves embody principles of late-life development, creativity, and wisdom—to work with the aging population worldwide.
2. To educate and support wise and creative leadership among the aging so they might become an effective force to create a sustainable future for all.
3. To promote research, publications, academic programs, partnerships, responsible practice, and special projects that facilitate an appreciative global vision concerning the full breadth and diversity of aging well.

4. To empower an aging population with the knowledge, skills, resources, and support to positively affect their own lives and the society in which we live.
5. To develop and maintain information and to provide support for those who must make decisions regarding the desires and needs of aging citizens.
6. To seek out and make known creative new methods for living longer, healthier, more fulfilling lives.
7. To give Fielding faculty, emeriti alumni, alumni, and current students the opportunity to make unique academic and research contributions from their own experience to this new field, and to work collaboratively with others in the field of creative longevity and wisdom.

The following collection of works represents a growing store of knowledge that will fuel our mission of becoming a worldwide leader in positive aging. All of the papers were submitted by members of the Fielding community: faculty, alumni, students, fellows in the Creative Longevity and Wisdom Project, and recipients of the Creative Longevity and Wisdom Outstanding Scholar awards. While some of the papers have been published elsewhere and others are original, they all serve to illustrate the ability, interest, and commitment of members of the Fielding community to creative longevity and wisdom development.

There are four sections in the collected papers: the aging process—dispelling myths and creating a positive image; women’s creativity, wisdom, and development; aging in the workplace; and the scholar-practitioner in creative longevity and wisdom.

We’ve also included a mind-map of longevity programs, along with their Web site locations, that we consider comparable to the Creative Longevity and Wisdom Project. The map was designed by Creative Longevity and Wisdom doctoral student fellow Pauline Albert. Another doctoral fellow, Don Lynd, prepared an annotated bibliography of relevant Fielding dissertations.

As the Fielding Creative Longevity and Wisdom Project continues to grow and evolve, so will the collected papers. For a more complete understanding of our project, please visit our Web site at www.fielding.edu.