

IN THE LIGHT AND DARK MOMENTS OF AGING

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Purpose: This humanistic gerontology investigation describes the purpose and meaning assigned to significant life-experiences and mile-stones events reported by older adults in oral-history interviews, and found in works of art, poetry, and song lyrics, and substantial artifacts.



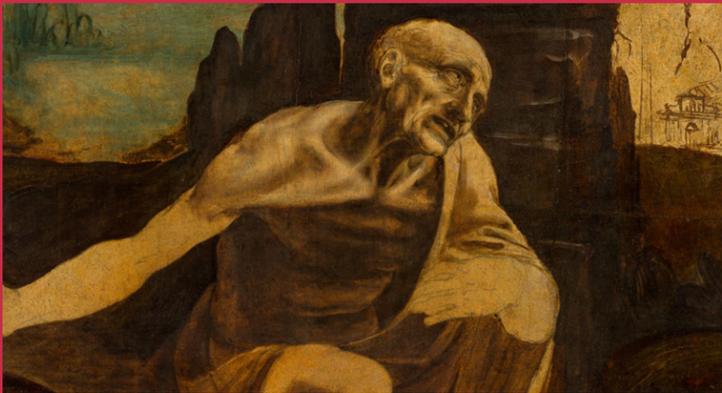
Interview with M.J

- M.J was born and raised in Green Bay, WI. He would play in the park near his home all day long during the summer.
- M.J was bullied during his teen years. He moved school's to avoid being bullied and to have fun with new groups of people.
- M.J's husband committed suicide. Even after his husband passed away, he found new activities to fill him with happiness and excitement.



Discussion with M.J

From M.J's earliest memories, he vividly remembers and praises moments of play. He describes childhood activities as the central point during his early adolescent years. As he transitioned to an adult, he began to encounter difficulties in play due to bullying. However, he found his way out of this situation and continued to create fun memories with friends. After his husband's tragic death, he still shared playing with his grandson and volunteering for a hospital as forms of play that make up his happiness today. A key aspect that I focused in observing was the ways that the elderly overcome challenges throughout life. In M.J's interview, I learned that through social interactions, exploration, and in giving of himself through volunteering, he is able to find the happiness that makes him enjoy life. Even while having memories of being bullied and his husband's death, he is still able to find happiness in his life. He says, life is full of challenges and each person needs to find their way to life happily. For him and for many, it is through spending time with those they care about, such as family and being part of activities that create excitement. In the artifacts below, play is not a common theme, however, in a second interview I conducted, B.B also expresses the importance of finding activities that are joyful to help her feel happy, even though challenging and sad moments of life



"Saint Jerome Playing in the Wilderness"
- Leonardo da Vinci

Discussion of Visual Arts

Depictions of the elderly are often shown reminiscing, in a stage of discomfort, but also with great will-power to remain strong. In this artifact, St. Jerome is tightening his arm, and the muscles of his arm are very tense. This shines a light on his strength and courage. His face however, is tilted and his eyes are droopy and unfocused to create a point that he is suffering and the problems he is facing are draining him. Visual representations of aging often display the elderly as tired and exhausted. However, many times they are placed in sceneries of reflection, such as St. Jerome in the wilderness. Other visuals of St. Jerome include him being placed in a desert. These backgrounds create a sense of accomplishment in reaching life's goal. An aspect to take from this artifact is how the visual arts display aging, and how drawings and paintings often visually depict poems and songs, such as "I'm Still Here, by Pat Fleming which I will describe next.

"I'm Still Here", Pat Fleming

My looks are nothing special, my face reveals my age, my body shows some wear and tear, and my energy's not the same.

Too often my memory fails me, and I lose things all the time. One minute I know what I plan to do, and the next it may just slip my mind.

I try hard to avoid my mirror. There are things I would rather not see, and even those times when I just catch a glimpse, I can no longer recognize me.

The things I used to do with ease can now cause aches and pains, and the quality of the things I do will never be quite the same.

Discussion of Poetry

Poetry is a form of art that allows us to express our thoughts and feelings. In the poem, Fleming describes her feelings of unpreparedness to aging, while showing the difficulty in understanding what has happened to her physical appearance. She also expresses cognitive changes and the inability to go back in time. Overall, this poem helps me understand the discomfort the elderly feel as they begin the process of aging and the changes both physically and mentally that take place during this time in development. Similar to St. Jerome's painting, Fleming describes the "wear and tear" that can also be seen in St. Jerome. She explains that even when she looks at herself, she cannot recognize who she is. An overcoming moment in aging is acceptance. St. Jerome's artifact and Fleming's poem add to this idea that growing old is a challenge itself, because as end of life approaches, people do not want die. Instead, they rather deny the process of aging. However, for those who do accept this idea, such as M.J and B.B they look for the good things in life, such as spending time gathered with their loved ones and sharing their knowledge and wisdom by volunteering and speaking about life through programs such as the Lifelong Learning Institute.

Conclusion: In this humanistic gerontology investigation we are able to discover three distinct aspects of aging: seeking for happiness, feelings of weakness, and strength through wisdom which is also referred to as gerotranscendence. In the interview with M.J, findings playful moments allowed him to continue to life happily. For St. Jerome's visual artifact, it highlighted physical weakness but also the ability to survive and have strength through maturity and wisdom that can only be gained through time. Lastly, in Fleming's poem, we are able to see the physical weakness that comes with aging and denial of this process. Together, these three artifacts provide insight on how the elderly may view life. Aging provides light moments, brought by seeking happiness and having a natural ability to have transcendence or a transformation created through maturity and life's experiences. However, there are also dark moments and challenges that although tragic and devastating, provide knowledge to the elderly that can only be experiences through the process of aging.