

**Aging Well** A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 21 September 2008 Rev. Chip Roush

FIRST READING “Holy Defiance,” by Sister Thelma-Anne, SSJD

I said, “I would dance”;  
Restraint said, “No.” I cried, “Let me out!”  
Caution urged, “Wait.” I sought ecstasy;  
Prudence warned, “Don’t.” I said, “Things must change”;  
Custom asked, “Why?” I tried to let go;  
Habit sneered, “Can’t”  
And I told them all To leap, run or crawl  
Out of my life By the nearest exit.

SECOND READING from “Children Learn What They Live,” by Dorothy Law Nolte

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.  
If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.  
If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.  
If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.  
If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.  
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.  
If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.  
If children live with fairness, they learn justice.  
If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.  
If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.

THIRD READING Our last reading is from the book, *Aging Well*, by George E. Vaillant. Vaillant is the Director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, in which 824 men and women have been studied throughout their lives, from their youth to great-grandparenthood.

“Some may argue that the term *successful aging* is an oxymoron. For is not *aging* inextricably associated with loss, decline, and approaching death? Is not *success* inextricably associated with gain, winning, and a zestful life? Perhaps, but the fact is that the majority of older people, without brain disease, maintain a sense of modest well-being until the final months before they die. Not only are [many] old [people] less depressed than the general population, but also a majority of the elderly suffer little incapacitating illness until the final one that kills them. No, successful aging is not an oxymoron... Among the many significant findings to emerge from the Study...thus far...

It is not the bad things that happen to us that doom us; it is the good people who happen to us at any age that facilitate enjoyable old age. Healing relationships are facilitated by a capacity for gratitude, for forgiveness, and for taking people inside...

A good [committed relationship] at age 50 predicted positive aging at 80... Low cholesterol levels at age 50 did not.

SERMON When Rebbe Hayim Meir was in his last years, his legs became impaired and they had to carry him on a chair to the synagogue. The first time this happened, a person who was watching burst into tears. When asked why he was crying, the man explained that it hurt him to see that the Rebbe is unable to walk. The Rebbe replied, “And all the way here I was thinking how I should praise and thank God that my old age began with my feet and not with my head.”

Whether it starts with our feet, or our head, or our eyes or any other body part that Mary Anne mentioned in her song, the process of aging can be difficult and frightening. Dr. George E. Vaillant understands that, and he tries to help people remain healthy and happy into old age. His book, *Aging Well*, is subtitled “Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life.” He offers seven factors that predict successful aging.

Vaillant derives these factors from the woman and men with whom he works as part of the Harvard Study of Adult Development. This is a longitudinal study, which means that the subjects have answered questionnaires and taken physicals and been interviewed regularly throughout their lives. Unlike most research, which focuses on a relatively brief moment in time, longitudinal studies follow their subjects over long periods. Such tests are more difficult—and more expensive—to perform, but they help us to better understand how our choices early in our lives affect us later. In fact, the Harvard Study is still the longest-

running longitudinal study of human development ever attempted. It tells an invaluable story of how we change and adapt as we age.

Now, the study is not perfect. There are many more men than women, and the subject population is almost exclusively white. There *are* people of different classes, from different social locations, but they are all from the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So we cannot say that these findings are definitive for every human in every life situation. But the results are very similar, across gender and class boundaries, so it is at least plausible that they hold in general.

Of course, as good Unitarian Universalists, you are going to judge the results according to your own experience, anyway, so I offer you Vaillant's conclusions for you to consider through the lens of your own lives.

First of all, let me share some of the factors that did NOT predict successful aging.

Ancestral longevity. It turns out, it does not really matter as much if our parents and grandparents live long lives. It doesn't hurt to come from a long-lived family, but our choices, and our relationships, are much more important than our genes.

Cholesterol. A subject's cholesterol level at age fifty had no bearing on whether she or he was happy and healthy at age eighty. I am not suggesting that you should totally *ignore* your cholesterol. Particularly if you have already had a heart attack, it is important to reduce your cholesterol. Otherwise, it may not be as crucial as television advertising might suggest.

Stress. It may seem counter-intuitive, since stress can cause headaches, ulcers, and cause us to lose sleep. However, it appears that if we live long enough, we recover from those adverse effects. Again, I am not saying that we should seek out stressful situations, but I am offering reassurance that any stress you are experiencing now will not necessarily prevent you from enjoying a successful old age.

Okay, so stress may not prevent it, but what will *encourage* a long and happy life? Vaillant reports that any four of the following seven factors will predict healthy aging. They are "not smoking," mature defenses, not abusing alcohol, a committed relationship, weight, exercise and education.

By far, the most important factor was smoking. If you have never smoked, or if you quit by the time you are fifty, you are quite simply more likely to be alive at 75. The first step toward feeling happy and healthy is to be alive in the first place. Nicotine is the most addictive substance known to science. It can be very, very difficult to quit. As Sister Thelma-Anne noted, too often, Habit says "Can't." But at least according to this study, it is definitely worth it, to quit.

The second most important factor for healthy aging is what Vaillant calls "mature defenses." Our defenses are the ways that our unconscious mind deals with the pain and conflicts of human life. Everybody has them, everybody uses them. Importantly, everybody uses different defenses at different times.

There are a couple dozen different mechanisms that help us cope with our suffering. Vaillant defines them as more or less mature depending upon how likely they are to allow us to experience future growth. Immature defenses are more likely to close us off to future experience, and thereby prevent future growth, whereas mature defenses leave us open to later possibilities.

To make this more concrete, I will offer a few examples. You may have heard the terms *repression* and *suppression*. Sometimes, when an emotion feels too dangerous, we may bury it deep inside ourselves. A child may be angry at her caregiver, but it may feel too dangerous to express that emotion—she is dependent upon her caregiver for food and shelter. So she might repress those feelings, and shut them off entirely. Unfortunately, this can lead to the child being unable to feel that emotion at all. Even years later, he may have difficulty expressing that repressed feeling, even in circumstances where it is normal or necessary to do so. Vaillant would call this an immature defense.

A similar, but more mature, defense is suppression. When, for example, you find a way to *not* scream at your boss, or your customer, or child, but rather count to ten, and reply calmly, and then walk away and later talk to a friend or partner and express your true anger, that is suppression. It still bottles up the emotion inside, but for a shorter time. A person whose unconscious mind uses suppression is better able to feel and express their emotions, and to continue to learn how better to express them, as they age. Vaillant therefore considers suppression a mature defense.

Now, I want to stress that these are *unconscious* defenses. We do not choose them; they do not make us good or bad people—although they can make our lives more or less difficult in the future. Our minds simply make the best use of what is available at the time.

Fortunately, as we age, our subconscious often learns to use more mature defenses. The pulse of life, throbbing in us all, is always trying to thrive, to blossom more completely through us. As we see other human beings demonstrate different ways of coping, and as we test out different approaches ourselves, our unconscious learns what works better, what enables us to handle conflict without making future circumstances worse. As we age, we almost inevitably come to use more mature defense mechanisms.

Now, this process is not irreversible. Sometimes, when there is too much pain in too little time, we may again resort to immature defenses. Again, our mind does whatever it has to, to cope with its environment. But as long as we are alive, and as long as we are exposed to other people, who use mature defenses, we can adapt and change and grow ourselves.

Thus it appears that the various people in our lives have a pretty large impact on how mentally healthy we are, on how successfully we cope with the vicissitudes of life, and on how happy we will be as we age.

One of the lenses that psychologists use to study how a person's development is affected by other people is called Self Psychology. One of the people who helped invent Self Psychology was Heinz Kohut, who, by the way, attended the First Unitarian Society in Chicago, in the 1970s.

Kohut examined the ways that human beings need relationships with others in order to live up to their full potential health. He found three primary ways that a person benefits from others. He called these mirroring, idealization, and twinship. Oversimplifying quite a bit, these mean being told that one is good, that one is safe, and that one is like others.

Let us explore how these feel: I invite you to close your eyes for a moment, and imagine that you are a young child. Imagine that an adult whom you love—a parent, a teacher, a neighbor, somebody—tells you how clever you are, or how fast a runner, or how good an artist. Doesn't that feel good? Without opening your eyes, imagine your current boss, or your partner, or your parent, telling you that you did a good job on that last project, or that you handled a situation with your teenager well, or that you look great in that sweater. Doesn't that feel good, too?! Kohut would call that mirroring, and he points out that we need to be mirrored throughout our lives.

Now, imagine as a young child, sitting in the lap of an adult whom you love and trust. Imagine curling up there, the adult's arms wrapped around you, and feeling completely safe and secure. That is a form of idealization. As adults, we still need to feel safe, and we also need to respect and admire others.

Finally, imagine a childhood fear of thunderstorms, or of the dentist, and imagine an adult telling you that she or he is scared, too, but that you can get through it together. That is twinship. As an adult, it's like being disappointed by a movie that the critics all recommended, then hearing that your best friend didn't like it, either. It feels validating. Imagine attending a cancer-survivor's support group, and learning that your feelings are not abnormal, that you are not alone in your emotions and perceptions. It can be vital to experience such twinship.

Kohut called such experiences selfobjects. This is a clumsy term, so more recent researchers use the term "essential others." Our subjective experiences of other people, indicating to us that we are good, or safe, or not alone, are our essential others.

Books and jobs and ideas and churches can also function as essential others; they also can be experienced as providing support. But it is most often our experience of another person that serves as an essential other.

If we are lucky, we will have enough essential others in our life, as children, as teens, and as adults, so that we will learn to cope with conflict and suffering in mature ways. If we are less lucky—in other words, if we are just about everybody—we will grow up with an insufficient amount of support. We will not receive enough mirroring, and idealization and twinship, and we will continue to struggle and seek out that support. Happily, we *can* find it later in life, it happens all the time, but it reinforces our need for essential others throughout our lives.

How many of you have seen the picture of the baby monkey, clinging to a cloth-covered fake mother monkey, while there is another fake mother, made of wire mesh and a bottle of milk, right next to it? The experiment proved that monkeys need warmth, and softness, and *comfort* as much as they need food. I

think the lesson applies to humans, as well. We need to be loved, and supported, and told that we are good and safe and not alone almost as much as we need food and shelter.

Vaillant reports that the adults he studied, who had the most mature defense mechanisms and, not coincidentally, the most success in life, were those people whose parents or caregivers allowed them to fully express their feelings when they were young.

If our caregivers cannot handle our emotions, if they are frightened by them, or condemn them as somehow inappropriate, then we will not learn to cope with our feelings in successful ways, and it will require much more time, and relationships with other essential others, before we learn to handle our human feelings. If our parents allow us the space to feel our emotions, and guide us toward safe ways of expressing them, and model good emotional coping skills themselves, then we are much more likely to develop mature defenses early in life.

When parents or caregivers remain with sick children, when they stay engaged with kids who are crying or ranting or otherwise trying to cope with pain or conflict, then the children learn to deal with their own pain. They learn that it will eventually end, they learn to bear it successfully, and they may even learn to plan for future disappointments and conflicts. Again, no parent so far has gotten it exactly right—everyone does the best they can—so when our parents do not do it, then we can still get it from friends or teachers or ministers or any of thousands of other possible essential others in our lives. And even if our parents did do everything perfectly right, we would still need essential others as adults, as we face the challenges and trials of later life stages.

Remember Vaillant's quote, "It is not the bad things that happen to us that doom us; it is the good people who happen to us at any age that facilitate enjoyable old age."

How many of you ever watched Mr. Rogers on TV? Fred Rogers helped a couple generations of children cope with the difficulties of growing up in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a fine example of an essential other. In 1999, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

During his acceptance speech, he asked the audience to take "ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are, those who have cared about you and wanted the best for you in life. Ten seconds. I'll watch the time." Some people thought he was joking, but he raised his arm, and looked at his watch, and was silent for ten seconds. When the time was up, Mr. Rogers told the audience how pleased those people would be, to know how highly they were thought of. The camera panned through the crowd, full of high-powered executives and big stars, and there were tears on faces everywhere.

This morning, I will make the same invitation. Think of the people who have served as your essential others—think of those who have helped you become who you are, those who have cared for you, and who wanted the best for you. Ten seconds, starting now. I'll watch the time.

{10 seconds}

The people of whom you were just thinking—those relationships with caring people—are our real wealth in this world. We have many essential others in our lives.

And whether you know it or not, you serve as an essential other to someone else. There is a child, or a coworker, or a neighbor, or a perfect stranger whom you allowed to go ahead of you in line, whose feels better about his or her life because of you.

Our mental health depends upon our relationships, both in the past and in the present. Our mental health twenty, or thirty, or fifty years from now depends upon our choices, and to a huge extent, upon our relationships. Even one good friendship can do wonders, and it is never too late to begin to seek out or create such relationships. We are not only interconnected, or interdependent, with each other—we are *essential*.

So may we be.