

Opinion

EVERYDAY WELLNESS: Choose how you want to age

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By Gail Donahue

Beverly Kidder has been the director of the Aging and Disability Resource Center of the Agency on Aging of South Central Connecticut for the past 16 years. She is a trained social worker who, for 27 years, worked as a medical social worker in a community hospital. Bev has taught part time at several colleges and universities as an adjunct instructor and is currently a member of the faculty at the University of New Haven, teaching Aging Policy. In 2013 she published a book called *The Gift of Caregiving* dedicated to her mother Shirley, her husband Tom and their son Daniel, both whom, she writes in the dedication, "helped make Shirley's last few years a gift through their loving caregiving."

A recent conversation with Bev included many aspects of aging. Here is what she had to say about it: "There are a number of things that are positive about aging. You have the opportunity to get closure on a number of things. When you're young you're too busy raising a family, building a career. The luxury of aging gives you the opportunity to look back, reflect on life, make amends and rebuild relationships. Aging gives us the distance of time and maturity to go back. Some people stay lonely, angry and bitter. People who go gracefully spend time building and fixing relationships." She shares about a man who was the primary caregiver for his mother yet he had felt throughout his life that his mother liked his younger brother better, that she loved him more. One day he revealed these lifelong feelings to his mother. She had a revelation of her own, explaining to him that when she discovered she was pregnant with his younger brother she didn't want to have the baby. She did have him and felt so guilty about not wanting him that she doted on him. She hoped the younger son would never suspect her original feelings about him, that he wasn't wanted. "You were the one I wanted" she declared.

Bev continues: "We don't all become sages. I don't think we become wise, as a group, as we age. You can become wiser than you were. Even if you're not open to it, you're wiser than you were the last mistake. All of us are wiser than we were previously. If your whole focus of aging is to stay young then you will fail constantly. You can't stay young."

"Another benefit of aging" Bev notes "is that you don't quite care about other people's opinions of you so much. It's very liberating. For a lot of folks, as they age, they appropriately come to see that a lot of the things they didn't get to do didn't matter anyway." She continues that it's important "to identify that this is how it could be, this is how it is and this is what I need to do to get there."

The Agency on Aging sponsored its 29th Annual Centenarian Luncheon on May 6, 2015. "Some centenarians" Bev states, "can name something that got them to a hundred years old and some can't name a thing." Fifteen years ago, at one of the luncheons Bev was talking with a woman, 102 years old, about her age and what was good about it. Her reply was that being 100 gave her the opportunity to bury 3 sons. Bev: that was so overwhelming to me I never forgot it.

Two years later, at another luncheon, one of the honorees, a man, beckoned Bev over to him requesting that she bring him over in his wheelchair to a woman nearby. She did as he asked and then he introduced the two women saying to Bev: "this is my lost love." They had been in grammar school together and her parents, who disapproved of their closeness, saw the need to send her to high school out of state in Massachusetts. No one would tell him where she was.

Their lives went on. They both married, had families. She had been in Massachusetts until she, and the married daughter she lived with, moved to this area again for her son in law to be at Yale. "She grabbed my hand" Bev smiles "and said this is the best day in 25 years." Two years later Bev saw her at the centenarian luncheon, again, and asked about the gentleman. He had died and until then the families would arrange for the couple to spend time together.

Bev: "There are many ways to make things better or worse. As you look at changes in aging it is so negative. There are many things to look at, physical negatives, loss and sadness. There is no point in putting a rosy face on it. There are very high rates of depression and suicide amongst older adults. It doesn't have to be that way. Older adults have resilience if you get them on the right track."

When asked about how our American culture treats aging vs. other cultures her reply is that "We don't have specific roles for older adults in our culture aside from grandparents. Most cultures have roles for older adults. They haven't lost their identity."

"So many people tell me" Bev notes "that the best part of aging is grandchildren. You have more maturity than you did when raising your own children and you have the time to indulge them." Bev's own mother lived with her family. She shares that one of her son's best memories is playing cars with his grandmother. She would push the car back and forth with him and only stopped when he didn't want to play anymore. "It was the best part of her life."

"Your task" she says "is to create your legacy. Getting older affords us the opportunity to find hidden talents in ourselves because we have the freedom of time. Are we going to create a legacy?"

The Agency on Aging is celebrating older Americans month with The Art of Aging, an exhibit of artwork by people 60 years and older. Bev says most of the exquisite work presented is by people who never picked up a paintbrush until they were 65 years old.

Gail Donahue lives in Hamden. She is committed to staying well and aging slowly.

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