

### Transpersonal Gerontology from a Contemplative Perspective

EDMUND SHERMAN, Ph.D.  
*Waterville, New York*

This is, in a sense, a dual perspective on the question of a transpersonal gerontology. One perspective is that of a professional gerontologist who has engaged in decades of research, teaching, and practice in the field of aging. The second is that of an octogenarian in his 84<sup>th</sup> year of life. Each of these perspectives informs the other as I think of contemplative aging and its relevance for a transpersonal gerontology.

When asked what books I would recommend on “aging, consciousness, and spirituality” I turn first to those professional gerontologists who influenced me most in the conception and development of *Contemplative Aging* as a book and an actual “way of being” in late life. Their research and writing on the spiritual dimension of aging provided validation for what I was finding in my own research, practice, and personal experience in aging. Tornstam’s *Gerotranscendence* and Atchley’s *Spirituality and Aging* are particularly validating in this respect. I was aware of their research well before the books were published and their findings provided important independent corroboration of the spiritual element in diverse populations. There were some reservations initially about Tornstam’s findings because his studies were done on large samples from Scandinavian populations of older persons. There was concern that older Americans might be different. However, Atchley pursued the same issues with older Americans, and in a specific focus-group study found strong corroborative evidence for three key features of Tornstam’s Gerotranscendence: (a) feeling a greater connection to the universe; a cosmic consciousness, (b) finding greater satisfaction in one’s inner life, and (c) having less fear of death.

Harry Moody has probably been the foremost proponent of a spiritual approach to aging of all the professional gerontologists in recent decades. His book, *The Five Stages of the Soul*, speaks not only to my own research and practice with American elders but with my own aging experience. The same can be said for Erik Erikson’s *The Life Cycle Completed* (1982) in which he provides

a more comprehensive exploration of the eighth and final stage of human development. He identifies the essential style or “ritualization” of old age as “*philo-sophical* for in maintaining some order and meaning in the dis-integration of body and mind it can also advocate a durable hope in wisdom” (1982, p. 64). In effect this calls for the development of something like a philosophical faith. Actually, Karl Jaspers (1967), the twentieth century German philosopher, proposed a philosophical faith commensurable with Erikson’s philosophical style of old age. Jaspers claims that a philosophical faith is one which relies on reason and experiential insight rather than revelation, prophesy, or doctrine. He felt that such a faith could move one toward the Ground of Being, “the incomprehensible, inconceivable, the all encompassing.”

The theme of Being is central to *Contemplative Aging*, as the subtitle of the book, “*A Way of Being*,” indicates. In this regard Erich Fromm’s *The Art of Being* (1992) described this contemplative turn that took place in his own later life. At that time he began to meditate and he found mindfulness meditation to be the most appropriate and meaningful for his old age. Mindfully following the breath is central to this form of meditative practice, which is especially fitting from a spiritual perspective. Not only is the breath essential to our very existence, our being, but in several different languages the word *breath* is synonymous with the word *spirit*, e.g., Greek (*pneuma*), Latin (*spiritus*), Sanskrit (*prana*), and Hebrew (*ruach*).

Mindfulness is particularly well suited to late life when one slows down physically and perceptually, conditions which enable one to pay more attention to one’s immediate environment, thoughts, and actions. The breath is also helpful in applying full awareness to such routine activities as walking, eating, watching, and thinking. Living becomes more fully transparent and imbues even the most mundane activities such as washing, sweeping, arranging and so on with a certain aura and sanctity, which Atchley (1997) has called “the everyday mysticism” of old age.

In pursuing mindfulness as a central element in contemplative aging Thich Nhat Hanh’s book, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*, was especially helpful in describing the details and nuances of mindfulness practice in both meditation and daily living. From a similar Buddhist perspective Ram Dass made a major contribution to the meaningfulness of contemplative aging through his courageous and inspired recovery from a massive stroke, as described in *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying* (2000). He contributed in two important ways. The first is his superb graphic description of the soul in relation to the human ego and the Ground of Being, which he calls “Awareness” (2000, p.27). It illustrates so well the crucial difference between the transpersonal and the egoistic views in terms of spiritual development and illumination. The second is his description of how he dealt with the dementia of his eighty-six year old aunt with Alzheimer’s (2000, pp.93–94). It was a supremely sensitive and benevolent approach to persons with late-life dementia, and one that should be adopted more widely in gerontological practice.

Harry Moody’s *The Five Stages of the Soul* (1997) had particular relevance for contemplative aging, most notably the latter three stages of his paradigm: The

Struggle, The Breakthrough, and The Return. In the spiritual quest of contemplative aging we are challenged by feelings of regret, disillusionment, depression, and often cynicism, which are largely the result of past events and behaviors. These feelings are confronted in a process known as the “life review” (Butler, 1963) and in a form called “existential reminiscence” (Sherman, 1991, p.175). In this form the older person attempts to (a) resolve troubling issues from the past, (b) arrive at a better understanding of one’s self, and (c) determine the meaning of one’s life.

The painful feelings and angst that are experienced in this process make up much of “The Struggle,” but from this struggle comes reconciliation with the past, which marks “The Breakthrough.” This leads to “The Return” in which: “Life goes on as before, and we go on with it in the ordinariness of everyday life” (Moody, 1997, p.38). However, through this process there has been an illumination and sanctity added to that ordinariness. The spiritual nature of this everyday mysticism is apparent as part of the gerotranscendence experience, but the nature of that meditation and how that spiritual consciousness is achieved experientially is still a challenging area for further pursuit. The theory of gerotranscendence, for now, has offered meaningful empirical findings that elders spend more time in “meditation” and develop a “cosmic consciousness.”

Wilber (1996) has described two forms of spirituality, which he identifies as: (a) *Ascending* and (b) *Descending*. He describes the Ascending path as “purely transcendental and otherworldly, tending to devalue the body, the senses, and the Earth, whereas the Descending path “celebrates the Earth, the body and the senses.... The Descending is “purely immanent and despises anything transcendental” (1996, p.10). The term “cosmic consciousness,” as it is used in gerotranscendence theory, seems more of a mixture of the two types of spirituality delineated by Wilber. It appears to me, based on my own research and counseling practice with elders, to be both transcendent and immanent in nature. In fact, I think that the spiritual experience of cosmic consciousness was best described by Mircea Eliade (2009) in his concept of *Enstasy*. Enstasy is a form of meditative absorption, a state experienced as subjectless envelopment or immersion. Eliade stressed that it should be contrasted with ecstasy, meaning “to put outside” as in states of transport and rapture. I have found this to be an important distinction when it comes to the spirituality of gerotranscendence.

To the extent that transpersonal psychology is concerned with higher states such as cosmic consciousness, with transcendence of ego self, and with the spiritual and unitive dimensions of human existence, then a transpersonal gerontology is not only possible but inevitable. Finally, I have to add that it is hard to even imagine a transpersonal gerontology without a strong contemplative foundation.

### Selected References

- BUTLER, R. N. (1963). The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. *Psychiatry*, 26, 65–75.
- ELIADE, M. (2009). *Yoga: Immortality and freedom* (Willard R. Trask, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- ERIKSON, E. (1982). *The life cycle completed*. New York, NY: Norton.
- FROMM, E. (1992). *The art of being*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- HAHN, T. N. (1976). *The miracle of mindfulness*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- JASPER, K. (1967). *Philosophical faith and revelation*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- SHERMAN, E. (1991). *Reminiscence and the self in old age*. New York, NY: Springer.
- WILBER, K. (1996). *A brief history of everything*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc.

### The Author

*Edmund Sherman*, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus, University at Albany, State University of New York, where he was Professor of Social Welfare. Prior to his retirement he taught graduate courses in aging and human development as well as research and practice theory in social work. He also conducted research on aging in the Institute of Gerontology of the University at Albany. He received a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in social work from the University at Buffalo, and after extensive professional practice experience in child, family, psychiatric, and geriatric settings he obtained a Ph.D. in social work and social research from Bryn Mawr College. Professor Sherman has authored or co-authored twelve books and numerous articles on aging as well as social work practice and research. His most recent books include: *Counseling the Aging*; *Working with Older Persons*; *Qualitative Research in Social Work*; *Meaning in Mid-Life Transitions*; *Reminiscence and the Self in Old Age*, and *Contemplative Aging: A Way of Being in Late Life*. He is a Fellow of the Gerontological Society of America and a member of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences.