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A New Look at Senior Education

by Harry Sky



In this essay, Rabbi Harry Sky, founder of the senior college movement in Maine, provides his insights on the increasing desire by older adults for lifelong learning. He writes that older adults are seeking experiences to counteract the profound sense of loneliness and “disconnectedness” that often accompany retirement. Institutions such as Maine’s senior colleges provide one such kind of experience, though they are not the only answer. Rabbi Sky reflects that in this country, we have not afforded the honor to seniors seen in other parts of the world, and that we should take a page from other civilizations. 🐉

When we address senior education, we ought to begin by breaking it down into its components.¹ What additional information are we interested in presenting to our citizenry who find themselves in the “fourth stage” of life as defined by Carl Jung (i.e., the period of retirement from profession and coming to terms with the final stage of life)?

I deeply believe, as I have seen in my own life, that when one is placed in the category of retirement, subtle and radical changes occur. For many of us, there are health problems; for others, emotional problems. Still others have problems of faith: What will happen to me when my body stops functioning? Greater even than that is the desire of the older person to be viewed as a viable member of society. We wonder: Is the gold watch or the pat on the back a way of saying, “Your time is up. Step aside for someone else” or is this the closing of one door and the opening of another?

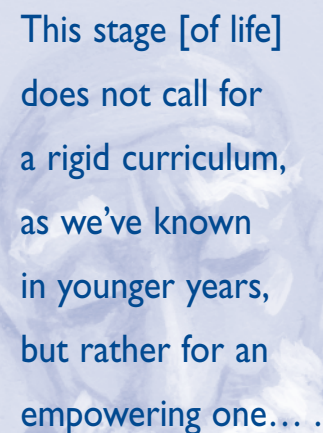
When we undertook the founding of Senior College, now known as the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI), we believed that the older person needs empowerment, not to be cast aside and to be told, “Your days are over.” If anything, once empowered, the older person finds within him- or herself a wellspring of untapped energy, ideas, and unfulfilled dreams. The older person begins to ask himself, “Who am I? Have I ever discovered my true calling in life? Is there something within me that is more than human (perhaps divine) and is guiding me? Could it be that until this moment of retirement, I ignored these questions and now I’m facing them and seeking an answer?”

You cannot approach this stage of life in purely secular terms. This stage does not call for a rigid curriculum, as we’ve known in younger years, but rather for an empowering one, for helping the older person to feel that “it ain’t over yet.” We at Senior College, realizing the metaphysical aspect of these later years, have tried to introduce a spiritual component into our offerings. For instance, in the earliest days of our movement, a course entitled “Telling Your Life Story to the Unborn Generations” was introduced. The purpose of the course was to help older people face themselves, both past and present, and allow the articulation of their internal message.

We have found that our volunteer instructors teach from passion as well as from experience. As Kali Lightfoot pointed out to me, not all of our facilitators have been teachers all their lives. Many who were teachers are not teaching in the field in which they worked, but all are giving instruction in areas about which they are passionate. When passion drives us, nothing stands in the way. Every part of our being becomes involved. We have discovered that the recipients of faculty’s passion, in turn, translate that received passion into their own driving spiritual force.

Recently, a civic ventures organization commissioned a research study of retirees. The study found three broad themes that characterize the experience of retirement: (1) an exhilarating sense of freedom; (2) a disquieting loneliness; and (3) loss of the particular kind of relationship that exists between people working together for a common purpose. We have found in the Senior College experience the antidote to the loneliness and the sense of loss. We have many volunteers, both on the teaching and administrative levels. Many of our constituents are constantly fanning out into the community, serving as emissaries for this new understanding of the *senex* (elder) stage of life.

The issue of the aging population has been studied time and again. Recently, economist Charles Lawton wrote in *Maine Today.com*: “The senior population of Maine is the core population. Maine has an older population that naturally derives less of its income from working and more from Social Security and Medicare payments.” This population’s dynamic differs from the working population. What drives them, what keeps them alive, is their attempt to come to terms with the life they’ve lived and not necessarily the life that awaits them. The incidence of alcoholism, loneliness, and despair is high in the senior population. These difficulties can be overcome if and when the



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senior citizen sees a new moment of existence for him- or herself. I purposely stress the notion of moment, for the well-adjusted senior has come to terms with the fact that central in his or her life is the moment in which he or she finds him- or herself. That is the precious gift given to the senior.

Thus, to advance the idea of *senex*, it is necessary for us to see this population as related to the younger members of society and their striving for achievement; and yet, it is *sui generis*. The senior cannot be expected to look at life as if it will never end. Chances are, he or she is too much of a realist to feel that way. However, what does trouble the senior, is the sometimes too cavalier approach of many caretakers of the senior members of society. Pages are filled with anecdotes describing physicians and other caretakers saying, “Well, he or she is x years old. They are on a slippery slope” descending into eternal darkness. For anyone to undertake such a judgmental approach to another person’s life is the height of arrogance. The senior, if anything, has learned that each person of the elder generation has his or her own life story. Each one possesses a unique inner dynamic that assures continued existence. This crucial dynamic is broken when (probably in good conscience) elderly patients are fed potions and drugs and God-knows-what-else with the statement, “Let’s try this; it may work.” The cumulative effect of the ingestion of so many foreign substances into the body in many cases undermines the health of that body. The older we get, the less assured are we of the vibrancy of our immune system, and to introduce in a cavalier way many foreign elements into the body can only affect the fragile immune system more harmfully.

What we have just said about health can also be applied to the social circumstances of the senior citizen. As stated above, the problems facing the senior citizen often include loneliness and a lack of rootedness—the feeling of connection that he or she knew in younger years. When you begin to tamper with the bit of it that remains in the senior social environment, you are headed for trouble. What is needed today is an entirely new approach to the issues of senior living, including efforts to:

- address each senior as an individual, not as a class object;
- honor the integrity of each individual citizen. Spend time listening to his or her story and encourage them in their attempt to continue with life;
- be prepared to deal with the spiritual aspect of senior living. There are many fears and unresolved questions. Be sensitive to them, so that the senior feels that he or she is not being considered as a castoff in the human community; and
- understand that once you accept the integrity of each individual, you are helping to write a unique story.

Tom Brokaw, in his masterful study, *The Greatest Generation*, was able to capture the uniqueness of the people of the World War II era. Remember that they largely consisted of survivors of the Depression, and whether young or old, they felt the bond of oneness with their fellow service-people. Many of us who lived through that generation hoped that the ultimate lesson for humankind after the Second World War experience would be that we are all one, no matter what our color, faith, affluence, place of residence, or accomplishments may be. We are all one.

Many of us, who, like myself, became interested in issues of spirituality, accepted, in a metaphorical sense, the tradition of Genesis that every human contains within him- or herself something of the Creator. We’ve tried to nurture that; we built our ideology on that premise. Every human is blessed with the gift of something of the Creator in him- or herself. Some of us went even further; we said that whatever science or technology discovers has been lying dormant, waiting for us to find it. It has led to a movement, which seems to be very popular in those senior circles that seek to become reconnected with nature and the universe. Some of us are saying that whatever we need to cure us of our ailments is to be found within the confines of nature. It hasn’t led to a back-to-nature movement exactly; however, it has led to greater interest in what nature

has to offer. We find (e.g., at OLLI) that more and more students are enrolling in history courses, spirituality courses, courses in genetics. How do we come to terms with our lifetime story? In other words, we're seeking some way to go back to nature or back to basics.

All of us seniors would like to see the final years of our lives as moments of self-discovery, of at last knowing who we are and why we are here. We seek to provide ourselves with a personal report card: Have we succeeded in achieving the goals that were obviously intended to be ours? To have this assurance is equal to being told, "You're alive, you're not a walking zombie." It's important to know that there's still something left within you, waiting to be shared, to believe that what you have to offer is of greater-than-ordinary importance. Many times, in eulogizing a friend, I've begun with the statement, "This is the story (or better still, the opus) of so-and-so..." We are, all of us, walking books waiting to be read, either by ourselves or by a willing audience. What can we hope to find in these personal books? Anecdotes galore? Moments of reflection? Moments of inspiration? Success in putting two and two together, adding up to more than four? We know that, in our lives, whether they be short or long, we've been touched by another and that we in turn have touched others.

All of the great spiritual traditions tell us that even in our "alone"-ness, we are part of another. This has been the great lesson of human living. Oneness is basically a collection of a group of "alone"-ers. When you and I meet, sometimes we feel *deja vu*, as if we have known each other all of our lives. Sometimes we feel that we are reflections of each other, and the ensuing bond is stronger than steel. This was, we believe, the Creator's intent. When the Kabbalists said, "We are in need of *tiquin olam* (i.e., the repair of the world)," they had in mind that they wanted to bring the world back to its pristine state, where no one was alone, when all of the "alone"-ers were one. Their theory was that the world at the time of creation went through a "big bang," which caused the shattering of all that was, the shards of which could only be brought back together once the entire universe was governed not by separateness, but by oneness, when all "alones" were part of

one. That's what we're trying to bring about. In doing so, we feel we are supporting health, wholeness, and the repair of souls that are sometimes torn.

In our attempt to achieve the goal of wholeness for our senior citizenry, we sometimes encounter skeptics, people who say, "Leave well enough alone; stop stirring things up for the sake of older citizens." This resistance exists in the halls of Congress and other political arenas. In this country, we have not afforded the honor to seniors that we see in other parts of the world. We should take a page from the more mature civilizations that exist on this earth. In China, for example, the older citizen is honored for his or her wisdom. In Israel, there are institutions for older citizens; daily someone comes to record their life stories. We can cite many more examples among Africans, Native Americans, and others who understand this principle. Unfortunately, we are so enamored of the glamour of youth that we forget that life is more than glitz, and that true achievement is more than momentary stardom. 🐉



Harry Z. Sky (b. 1921) is an adjunct faculty member of the University of Southern Maine, the former Rabbi (now Rabbi Emeritus) of Temple Beth El in Portland, and currently Scholar-in-Residence at Congregation Etz Chaim, Portland. He is the founder of the Senior College movement in Maine, which today includes the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI). Sky is also the recipient of the Rabbi Max L. Arzt Lifetime Distinguished Rabbinic Career Award and was designated as the 2002 National Primetime Awards Outstanding Older Senior.

ENDNOTE

1. I extend my appreciation to Kali Lightfoot, Director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Southern Maine, for her guidance and insight on senior issues.