

Cultivating the Elder Body of Wisdom

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Summary:

Unique approaches to nurturing body vitality, flexibility, and balance are possible for elders in ways that are not available in earlier years of life. Specific strategies of movement, body awareness, breathing awareness, and balance exercises are contextualized within the advanced experience and subtle intelligence of elders.

The title of Agesong's conference, The Poetics of Aging, inspired me to articulate for the first time some discoveries I have made over a lifetime, which are now specifically relevant to the challenges of advanced aging. The title alludes to the fact that aging is not just an inevitable force of nature to be put up with, but a unique and ultimate invitation to exercise our creative imagination in shaping ourselves.

In my case, as I edge up to my 80th year, I find myself in the enviable position of unusual health and vitality, the fruits of a lifetime of having to learn how to deal with severe restriction. I was born with an anomalous spinal column with calcium bridging over the disks between the vertebrae allowing for very little rotational and bending movements. By the time I was 25, I had chronic back and neck pain. I had severe childhood asthma through my late teens, leaving me with restricted breathing capacities. Then when I was 76 years old, I fell off a 20 foot cliff onto my back breaking my neck. With the help of magnificent therapists whom I have known for years, I have recovered, and now continue an active life of daily exercise, hiking, and nordic skiing in addition to teaching a full load of university courses. I experience dramatically less pain now than when I was a young adult. Along the way of this long journey towards elderhood, I have cobbled together, from the marvelous teachings I have received, a daily program of exercises for making my aging body, the basis for these reflections.

The crucial role of exercise in maintaining quality of life in late years is commonly accepted and widely researched. Without maintaining a vigorous program of bodily activity, physical and emotional health are endangered. And yet, the creeping realities of muscle-bone deterioration and joint impairments make it difficult to sustain an active regimen. Only with great effort, can one tough out exercises to keep muscle mass and avoid the disastrous effects of a fall, or the pathologies from collapsed organs. All too often, however, well-intentioned exercise classes, hoping to encourage playful enjoyment, approach elders in ways that infantilize us. Many such programs have been designed on the basis of experiences of younger people.

There is a possibility of a different approach to nurturing our vitality, more similar in concept to older traditions in India, China, and Japan, where advanced aging is valued as a positive achievement. "Cultivation" is an operative word. In this view, the aging body can be seen like an ancient oak or bottle of premium burgundy, something that, when carefully tended, results in a beauty only available after many years of care. In this more integral view of mind and body, growing old involves not only the possibility of a unique kind of wisdom based on a life of experience and learning, but also a more profound entry into the depths of intricate bodily movements, sensations, and strengths not accessible to younger generations. Specific practices based on this view invoke a transformation from passive submission to seemingly intractable natural laws to an active engagement in shaping our sensibilities and vitalities according to the wisdom that we have gathered over the earlier decades of our life. An older person, for example, even if severely limited in joint movements, can find unexplored intricacies deep in the interior of hips and shoulders. Traveling into such remote regions, one can explore his or her breath with a depth of memory, feeling, and imagination that are results of a rich life of experience. Even within the confines of a wheelchair, he or she can engage in body movements with a wit and subtlety unavailable to the young. Because of the capacity of such practices to open up new and fresh experiences of oneself, and new strengths, they provide a sense of pleasure and interest that are lacking in standard fitness regimens.

Elder Challenges

There are at least three specific challenges to developing the elder body:

1. Tone
2. Balance
3. Motility

An effective approach to elder cultivation needs to account for all of them.

'Tone' refers to the challenges we face as our muscle mass deteriorates and weakens. Without a regimen of toning, we are subjected to an overall collapse which affects not only our musculoskeletal frame, but the functioning of our organic body—breathing, digestion, sexual energy, insightfulness.

'Balance' refers to the wide range of bodily capacities that are required to stave off the disastrous falls that typically spell the beginning of the end. The inner ear, the webs of the so-called anti-gravity muscles, and our various proprioceptors conspire to help us know—at least in the background of our awareness—where we are right now, standing or walking. If we permit these systems to deteriorate, our footholds are in jeopardy.

'Motility' refers both to our capacities to move around as well as to interior motions within our organs. It depends on the flexibility of our joints and the resilience of our connective tissues. It is our defense against stagnation.

In the crucial background of these three regions of bodily cultivation is the ebb and flow of our breathing, our primal connection to being alive. Like the others, it too can be cultivated; it is not simply a given. By attending to it—its reach, rhythms, capacities—we can increase our vitality, sometimes to a surprising extent.

Unique Elder Capacities

What does it mean to claim that meeting these specific challenges to our elder development is any different from what might be expected from a 40-year-old or a 20-year-old? The answer has to do with the nature of bodily development, rooted in our evolutionary origins. The trajectory of this development, which mirrors the trajectory of intellectual development, moves from the gross and general to the intricate and specific. There are at least three specific qualities of this trajectory:

1. Interiority
2. Intricacy
3. Pleasure

'Interiority' and 'intricacy' are in some sense the essence of development over the life span. In the early years of life, the outer world is what demands our attention: learning to kick, grasp, walk, and utter sounds that get a response. Our perceptual life is externally focused. If development goes as expected, our senses become more attuned to their objects; our lungs gain capacity. The muscles that are being activated during these years are the larger outer ones—biceps, triceps, hamstrings, pectorals, ...

Hopefully, as one moves into young adulthood, there is an increasing turn away from a dominant attention to the object-world towards the inner world of feeling, emotion, reactivity, and varying states of excitement. Proprioception and interoception become regions of development. (I say 'hopefully' because our educational system and our national life are not marked by widespread emphasis on cultivation of an inner life.) In muscular life, this turn involves a development of some of the deeper layers of small muscles which proliferate through our bodies, along the entire length of our vertebral column, the deep interiors of our ribs, arms, and legs, the interior muscles of the pelvis and sphincters. There are so many groups of countless muscle fibers that even with a lifetime of attention to their development, none of us develops even a fraction. And yet, with each group of fibers awakened to consciousness, there are new senses of self revealed, and a corresponding enrichment of our perception of the world itself.¹

¹ One of my most important teachers about the relationship between specific cellular awareness and the evolution of consciousness is Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, *Sensing, Feeling, and Action: The Experiential Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering* (Northampton, MA: Contact Editions, 2008).

The cultivation of interiority and intricacy requires a different orientation from what is required for a younger-age fitness and alertness. Think for example of the intricacy required for tasks like sewing, drawing with a fine pen or pencil, playing a musical instrument, or becoming a lover. The bodily activations for these is different from what is required for the ordinary activities of daily life as well as demands for heavy lifting or sustained repetitive work activities. For these specialized tasks, we need to devote patient and careful attention to the awakening of small and precise movements.

Moshe Feldenkrais was one of a number of brilliant teachers who have made me aware of bodily intricacy. An Israeli, originally an engineer, he severely damaged his knee while a student at the Sorbonne, and was told he could not regain its functioning. He was determined to heal himself and did so by a careful journey into the intricate functioning of his body to the point where he eventually recovered his ability to walk and play soccer, teaching his brilliant work until he died in his 80s.² Another is Emilie Conrad Da'Oud who works with severely damaged people helping them recover neuromuscular patterns that have never been used by the injured person.³ Eugene Gendlin, the founder of the internationally well-known psychotherapeutic method of Focusing,⁴ makes intricacy a central notion in his philosophy of human development.⁵

'Pleasure' may seem out of place in this logic. And yet it seems crucial to me. As I have watched some of my family edging into their late 90s in communities of the elderly, I have gotten a first-hand sense of how hard it is to keep at it. Despite knowing that activity is crucial to a satisfying life, it just keeps getting harder each day. I have been particularly fortunate to meet gifted teachers who worked out methods of body cultivation that integrate movement and pleasure. That very pleasure is what has encouraged me to keep finding new ways to activate my joints, breathing, and muscles.

One of the keys to finding pleasure in body cultivation is entering into any of these activities with an attitude of inquiry rather than one of imitation or striving. Instead of approaching exercises as a regimen of prescribed movements, one explores a region or a type of activity in the same spirit that one would walk through a rain forest or along an ocean beach, letting one be washed by the beauties of what appears—the subtle textures,

² Moshe Feldenkrais, *The Potent Self: A Study of Spontaneity and Compulsion* (Berkeley, CA: Frog Ltd., 1985).

³ Emilie Conrad Da'Oud, *Life on Land: The Story of Continuum* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2007).

⁴ Eugene Gendlin, *Focusing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).

⁵ Eugene Gendlin, *Experience and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ Press, 1997).

shapes, micromovements, cellular pulsings. I am indebted especially to Charlotte Selver for awakening me to this kind of inquiry. A teacher of Sensory Awareness, she died at 103, a few hours after giving her last class, and three years after her third marriage.⁶ She and Emilie Conrad Da'Oud make the evocation of the spirit of inquiry the core of their teaching about working with our bodily experience. And I continue to be energized by creative spirit of Marion Rosen who is exactly twenty years my senior. She continues to teach and work with her bright intelligence as she edges up to her 100th birthday.⁷

Clues for elders and elder care-givers

The following clues are based on cultivating
Tone, Balance, and Motility
with attitudes of

Interiority, Intricacy, and Pleasure

1. Take any exercise form—a forward bend, a chi gong or tai chi gesture, a yoga posture, a pilates or gyrotonic shape, lifting a weight, . . . As you adopt that form, see if you can shift your awareness from imitating the external shape towards investigating its interior effects on your experience. This will typically involve slowing down the process instead of moving right away to the next shape.
2. Approach the few moments of inhabiting this form as one might improvise in music or dance where one begins with a given melody or sequence of steps. Instead of following the prescribed notes or choreography, you embellish, shift the tone into the new and fresh. Take a yoga sequence, a forward bend, for example. Enter the posture. But instead of keeping oneself in the prescribed movement shape, explore variations that feel interesting, wiggles, tiny shifts of direction, regions of the body that are not familiar. Let yourself be led by the small muscular impulses and releases that are occurring.
3. If confined in a wheelchair or within prosthetic devices, find the kinds of balance that are possible by the tiniest shifts of pelvis, noticing micromovements that allow your spinal column to elongate and then move in the tiniest new ways. You can apply this kind of investigation to the various joints throughout your body.
4. Periodically turn to your breathing. Notice the infinite regions of the inhalation/exhalation cycle, finding ways into nooks and crannies that are unfamiliar.
6. Over time, learn how to develop a range of exercises that feel intriguing to practice, even pleasurable not just for an aging body but for a mature mind. These include:

⁶ Charlotte Selver and Charles Brooks, *Reclaiming Vitality and Presence: Sensory Awareness as a Practice for Life* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2007)

⁷ Marion Rosen and Sue Brenner, *Rosen Method Bodywork: Accessing the Unconscious through Touch* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2003).

- cultivating the more intricate and subtle explorations of movement in the joints;
- muscular toning;
- exploring and expanding breathing capacities;
- refining senses of balance.
- Give special attention to where the pleasure lies: how to do this work with an emphasis on sensuality, inquiry, and creativity, rather than effort and obligation.

It is the poignant truth, that many of us have trouble seducing our focus away from the gossipy external realm of imitation and repetition to the interior regions of imagination and creation. Here is where the disciplines of depth psychotherapy and practices of meditation can be so helpful at this stage of our lives: giving us the assistance we might need to face the silent depths of ourselves, treasure chests of memories and insights.

Biography

Johnson, Don Hanlon, is a professor of Somatics at CIIS, founder of the first graduate degree program in Somatics, and director of the Center for Somatic Research. He is a practitioner of various approaches to body cultivation, and author of several books on the body, the latest of which is *Everyday Hopes, Utopian Dreams: Reflections on American Ideals*. More is on his [website](#).