



### **Late-Life Spirituality: A Choice!**

Interpreted from *Spiritual Passages*, Drew Leder, MD, Ph.D.  
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## **THREE WESTERN MODELS OF SUCCESSFUL AGING**

### **Socio-medical Model**

In this model, age comes with a litany of diminishment—of health, attractiveness, cognitive ability, income status and the list goes on. This model tries to remedy such dysfunction. This is the focus of gerontologists, doctors and the government.

Much good has surely come from this approach—Medicare, prevention measures for diseases, and more. However, this model reinforces the sense of aging as dysfunction; it highlights the losses of later life, not the creative and spiritual possibilities.

### **Productive Model**

This model is seemingly the opposite of the previous, putting aside dysfunction and discovering that older people can be just as productive as anyone else. The goal is to fight against ageist stereotypes of incapacity. There are inspirational examples of octogenarians activists, artist who excelled in later life, lovers who performed in the sack well into their nineties. A good old age is busy and engaged. Some retired individuals complain that they've never been so busy since they stopped working.

There is benefit from countering old-age incapacity; however, it is not really an aging model so much as of a midlife indefinitely prolonged. This paradigm limits the discovery of meanings in old age that would be genuinely independent of earlier socioeconomic roles. The down side is that it does not prepare one for life's losses. With the onset of diminishment, one may feel like a failure, become fearful or enraged.

### **Consumer Model**

Retirement communities offer nice housing, fun activities, well-prepared meals, all spiced up with outings to golf and the malls. This is the flip side of the productive model. It encourages us not to produce but to consume. Living seems pleasant for a time, but can finally grow trivial, boring, disconnected. Life is like a cruise ship...fun for a time but heading towards no particular port. Missing is the call to social contribution and psycho-spiritual growth.

The above models share a common problem. Though they seek to design a positive old age, they do not illuminate deep meaning in the aging process and can even truncate the search for such significance. There is a need for alternative paradigms of aging.

### **The Spiritual Model of Community and Aging**

Life in a community that welcomes all forms of spirituality (the human quest for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the non-human environment and, for some, God) can have a meaning of its own-- one that involves a sense of wholeness and fruition. While we may walk different spiritual paths heading towards a common goal, we actualize our quest for meaning in our relationships with family, friends and community. The losses of the aging provide the impetus to mature and the leisure to plunge into a spiritual quest.....to go beyond our ego-self. Dr. Leder has called this **THE SPIRITUAL MODEL OF AGING**.

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