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## ABANDONING THE TRAGEDY NARRATIVE

We are never too old to continue to learn, and last week some of us were fortunate to have learned something important in a meeting with someone who is a visionary – breaking down the stereotypes of what it means to be old, what it means to have dementia, what it means to be “different”.

Mary Fridley is a remarkable woman who coordinates an international movement called Reimagining Dementia: A Creative Coalition for Justice. Their mission is to “spread and create more humanity around the world, leading to the end of stigma and the tragedy narrative”.

There are people around the world living with dementia, carers, family members, community members, health and social services professionals, dementia activists and their allies, advocates, artists, academics, and policymakers who are rejecting the notion that getting old means deterioration, institutionalization, and death - segregated and excluded from our communities.

Mary and her group’s vision echo that of Seniors for Social Action Ontario. It is a vision of “care and support that promotes inclusion, relationships, creativity, joy, and the possibility of growth for everyone impacted by dementia” (Reimagining Dementia, 2022).

SSAO would take it a step further and say that care, support, inclusion, relationships and continuing the pursuit of all those things that bring us joy can, and should happen well into advanced old age, and they will – if we abandon the tragedy narrative and replace it with a narrative of hope and possibility.

Beliefs matter. “...beliefs don’t just live in our heads. For better or worse, those mental images that are the product of our cultural diets, whether it’s the shows we watch, the things we read, or the jokes we laugh at, become scripts we end up acting out” (Levy, 2022).

To hear the Ontario government tell it, getting old means deteriorating and ending up institutionalized. That is why they are building 30,000 more institutional beds in which to put us (Government of Ontario, 2022). Our government appears firmly entrenched in the tragedy narrative - lacking imagination and creativity, and their policies and actions are having a negative impact on older adults across the province.

Healthy Boomers are rejecting the government’s distorted and wrong-headed thinking. All over the world, and now in Canada too, this generation of elders is refusing the

tragedy narrative, not going into institutions, and those beds are closing – in the thousands (Quenneville & Andrews, 2022; Davis, 2022; Mohamed, 2022). Professionals won't work in them and elders won't live in them (Coleman-Lochner & Braun, 2022; Brown, 2022).

The prediction of all those visionary economists, including those in Canada, is coming true. This generation is doing what it always did. It is being resourceful, remaining engaged in its communities, being activist, advocating for social change, being creative, and continuing to enjoy life. Its definition of old age is not one of deterioration and death, but one of possibility and continued growth.

This does not mean that we deny the realities of physical illness or disability, only that we revise how we address them and refuse to see them as tragedies, but rather as opportunities to deepen our own understanding of life and to expand our compassion for ourselves and others. How we and those we love approach disability and physical illness may well determine how we end up experiencing them.

Decades ago, Erik Erikson who was a prominent psychologist and professor at Harvard University and the University of California at Berkeley called it. He said that there were eight stages of life and psychosocial development, the last stages of which are not despair and death, but Generativity vs Stagnation and Integrity vs Despair (Laurence, 2022). How we view the final stages of life may, in fact, be informed by how we lived the first stages of our lives.

The stage of Generativity vs Stagnation is connected to feelings of competence and being in a position to make a contribution to the world. It involves mentoring, volunteering, and in some cases making donations. It is a time of paying our life experiences forward. Elders who live to this stage often want to nurture something that will outlast them. But those still confronted with having to work out earlier stages of development may not seek out those kinds of opportunities and become stagnant instead.

The state of Integrity vs Despair comes with advanced old age, where people review their lives and either feel regret at things left unsaid or undone, or content with the choices they have made. They “saw the pieces fit together and created something special” whereas those who feel life did not come together may feel angry and bitter (Laurence, 2022).

But we are never too old to learn or to change.

The old Cherokee proverb about the two wolves comes to mind and it is true at any age. It is about the fight that goes on in all of us – the fight between two wolves – one full of anger, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego, and the other joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. Who we are, and the quality of our lives are determined by which wolf we feed.

People like Mary Fridley are feeding the good wolf, and spreading joy and creativity in their wake – a model of successful aging. We can all learn from her, especially the Government of Ontario.

It has long been said that age is a state of mind. The research has proven that to be true. Becca Levy, a Yale psychologist collected death records to find out whether or not people with positive attitudes in an earlier survey outlived those who were more negative. The results were pretty astonishing. Those with more positive views of their own aging lived, on average, 7.5 years longer than people with more negative views, irrespective of other factors in their lives (Winerman, 2006).

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**Members of the SSAO Board and co-founders wish all of you joy, hope, serenity, a positive attitude, and a sense of playfulness this holiday season! During the darkest days of the year may we find ways to brighten our own lives and those of others.**



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- For Mary Fridley and her improvisations see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvPjCGzsoqc>
- For an excellent book on positive aging, see Becca Levy – Breaking the age code: How your beliefs about aging determine how long and well you live. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/58586409-breaking-the-age-code>