

Santa Ana High School Article of the Week # 20

Why you should really start talking to old people more

Instructions: READ and ANNOTATE

- Mark your confusion.
- Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)

Student _____ Class Period _____

Why you should really start talking to old people more

Ten years ago, I reached a point in my career that felt either like a dead end or a turning point — I wasn't sure which. By then, I had spent 25 years as a gerontologist, professionally occupied with everything to do with aging. I conducted research using longitudinal data sets and sophisticated statistical analyses. I developed and evaluated programs to improve older people's lives. I taught courses and gave lectures on aging. I opined on policy issues affecting our aging society. So what was the revelation?

I never talked to old people.

My research kept me at more than an arm's length from the living, breathing individuals who were its subject. At best, hired interviewers spoke with my respondents. Elsewhere, I used even more distant secondary data sets. My "engagement" with real people involved checking codes and running statistics. The living, breathing humans who reported buoyant life satisfaction or high levels of caregiver stress were equally distant from me. And so I suddenly felt an urge to go out into the world of people in the eighth decade of life and beyond, and listen to what they had to say.

What I heard changed my whole approach to life. Perhaps it will do the same for you.

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In a seminar room on an Ivy League campus, I sat across from hopeful, earnest, and anxious college seniors. In a few months, they would leave the classic tree-lined campus, the football games, and the near-gourmet meals that U.S. dining halls now serve. I had arranged the meeting to find out what these "emerging adults" wanted to learn about work and careers from their elders.

Sitting with these students on a bright spring morning, I anticipated that they would want to hear about success strategies, tips for getting ahead, and suggestions for landing a high-paying dream job. So I was taken aback by the first question. It came from Josh, a future money manager dressed in a jacket and tie.

"I'd like you to ask them about something that really worries me," he said. "Do I need a purpose in life? That's what all the books say, but I guess I don't have one. Is there something wrong with me? And how do I get a purpose if I need one?"

There was furious nodding from the other participants. Because these students were driven to excel, they had devoured books about career strategies and success, many of which emphasized purpose. They had heard motivational speakers exhort them to find a single life passion, without which they were sure to drift, rudderless, through a disappointing career. But as we talked, it became clear that it just didn't feel that way to them. They might have an interest, an inclination, an inkling for something they would enjoy — but one all-consuming life goal eluded them. They feared that this lack of a unique and compelling purpose might doom them to a life of failure and futility.

And yet, from the other end of life's voyage, our elders give us a very different view of a life purpose — and a tip for finding one. Basically, the oldest Americans (most of whom also struggled with the question) tell you to relax. They say that you are likely to have a number of purposes, which will shift as you progress through life.

Marjorie Wilcox, age 87, brought this lesson home to me. Marjorie is tall, fit, and active. She captures a certain casual elegance. Marjorie devoted her career to developing affordable housing, traveling to the worst parts of industrial cities throughout the U.S. With this passion to make things right in the world and her own history of adversity, I expected a strong endorsement of purpose as the first condition for a good life.

In fact, I heard something different from Marjorie and many of the other elders I spoke to: namely, that our focus should not be on a purpose, but on purposes. She reported that the purposes in her life changed as her life situation, interests, and priorities shifted. She warned specifically against being railroaded in the direction of a single purpose.

"You will do several different things," she said. "Do not be on one train track, because the train will change. Widen your mind. That's what you should have as your priorities as a young person. Make sure you keep flexible. Lead with your strengths, and they will get you where you want to go."

The elders recommend that we reshape the quest for a purpose, thinking instead of looking for a general direction and pursuing it energetically and courageously. Determining a direction in life is easier, more spontaneous, more flexible, and less laden with overtones of a mystical revelation that sets you on an immutable life path. Times change, circumstances change — indeed, change itself is the norm rather than the exception. A grand purpose, in their view, is not only unnecessary — it can also get in the way of a fulfilling career. Instead, they have offered the idea of finding an orientation, a "working model" if you will, that guides you through each phase of life.

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But how should you go about finding a direction? How to settle on a purpose that fits your current life stage? One technique turns out to be immensely valuable — and yet most people ignore it. If you are searching for a direction or purpose, interview your future self.

There are in fact a host of benefits to doing this. Experiments have shown that when people are made to think in detail about their future selves, they are more likely to make better financial planning decisions, show altruistic behavior, and make more ethical choices. But it's hard to do. A good deal of social science research over the past decade has shown that most people feel disconnected from their future selves. It takes work to imagine oneself a decade or two from now — let alone a half-century or more. Researchers have gone so far as to invent software that "morphs" the reflection of a young subject to age 70 or 80.

But this is as far as time-travel technology seems to have gotten, so it's sadly not possible to meet your real future self. Yet it's astonishing how few people do the next best thing: interview an older person who embodies the "self" you would like to be. This idea came to me from Barry Fine, a highly successful serial entrepreneur who still manages a business at 89. In fact, he didn't use the term "future self." He used a word he'd learned growing up on New York's Lower East Side. His advice was to "find a maven."

Like many Yiddish expressions, maven defies a single definition. It's derived from a Hebrew word meaning "one who knows" or "one who understands." Mavens are trusted experts, reliable sources of accumulated wisdom. That's who we need to guide us, according to Barry.

"In whatever business I've been in, and I've been in about eight businesses — some successful, some not successful — the most important thing is to have is a maven," he said. "Somebody who can really guide you. Where I've done this, where I've had a wonderful maven, I've always been successful. Where I went by myself, on my own, I've always failed. When I haven't listened, I've lost a lot of money. Younger people may not be so aware of this. They don't really understand that there are so many aspects of business you don't get taught in school. They have to see long-term into the future. They need to think three years, six years, 20 years out. That is what the maven is for, steering them in the right direction, based on his or her experiences."

In any period when you feel directionless, wavering, stuck with one foot in two different worlds, and hearing in the back of your mind the song lyrics "Should I stay or should I go?" — find your future self. He or she should be old — and preferably really old. You don't want a 40-year-old if you are 20; you want someone in his or her 80s, 90s, or a centenarian if you can find one. You need your future self to have the truly long view, as well as the detachment that comes from a very long life.

This person also needs to be as close as possible to your imagined future self. Debating a career in medicine? Find a doctor who loved what she did. Worried about whether you can balance your values with a career in the financial services industry? Find an older person who struck that balance and made it to the end of life without regrets. Planning to work an undemanding day job so you have the energy to paint/write/act in your spare time? Some very old people did just that (and can tell stories of bohemian life that will sound very familiar today).

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When I hit my crisis point 10 years ago, I couldn't decide what to do, so I sought out Henry. Standing just a little over 5 feet tall and equipped with two hearing aids, Henry might not have seemed an imposing figure. But he was one of the leading developmental psychologists of his era, and he still came into the office every day to conduct research. Henry was cagey about his age, but I knew from talking with his wife that he had recently turned 93. On a whim, I asked him if we could have lunch. While he ate a green salad and I a cheeseburger, I let it all come out. Could I embrace this kind of risk, moving from churning out scientific articles in **turgid** academic prose to take the step of writing a book? A nonacademic book, at that? And if I didn't, would I regret it when I was his age?

He stopped me with single word: "Yes." Yes, he said, I would regret it if I did not take this leap, just as he regretted opportunities in his life that he had let slip by. He assured me that at his age, I would be much more likely to regret something that I had not done than something I had. And so I stepped away from the computer and the statistical software packages, and went on a search for the practical wisdom of older people. Ten years, 2,000 interviews, and two books later, I am not disappointed.

Sometimes things turn out to be less complicated than they seem. In preparation for my research, I plowed through books that promised to help me find my life purpose in a short six or eight weeks; books that offered to show me my purpose in a set of steps or exercises; and more books that simply **exhorted** me to find that purpose and do it now. Along the way, I have learned that I would be helped by **synchronicities**, purpose boot camps, life portfolios, and a number of books by divine inspiration. Maybe, I realized, it can be much simpler than that.

Why not begin with an activity as old as the human race: asking the advice of the oldest people you know? Because older people have one thing that the rest of us do not: They have lived their lives. They have been where we haven't. Indeed, people who have experienced most of a long life are in an ideal position to assess what "works" and what doesn't for finding a direction. It is impossible for a younger person to know about the entire course of life as deeply and intimately as an older person does. They bring to our contemporary problems and choices perspectives from a different time. These insights can make a world of difference to us. So find someone who mirrors your image of your future self and ask about your direction. You won't regret it.

Possible response options:

- At the end of the article, Pillemer tells us to ask “the advice of the oldest people you know.” Who in your life could you ask about something you have been wondering lately, something you struggle with or are confused about? Why would you or wouldn't you actually speak to this person in real life?
- Choose any passage and respond to it.