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Re-imagining the experience and study of aging

By

Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.

I recently returned from Okinawa and an awesome experience, not in the “shock and awe” sense of late military campaigns but rather in the jaw-dropping, humbling sense when one encounters something truly profound. With seven other Americans, I joined an assemblage that totaled some 80 people from several Southeast Asian nations, drawn to this longest-lived prefecture of the world’s longest lived country to re-invent gerontology.

Led by Dr. Ryo Takahasi, a small group of Japanese and American gerontologists have been working together the past three years toward developing a curriculum that would help people to understand the experience of aging. With a little reflection, one can appreciate the enormity of the task. While Japan can boast an advanced commitment in geriatric medicine, with almost five times as many of their schools of medicine having full departments of geriatrics as ours, there are almost no gerontology programs in their institutions of higher education. We have recognized that here is the opportunity to re-imagine or re-conceptualize what would constitute “gerontology” and how it is taught. Not that we are doing a bad job in the United States and in other Western countries. Where it already exists, the traditional core curriculum in gerontology includes social, psychological, and biomedical aspects of aging, with public policy sometimes included. We American gerontologists have even labeled these the “standards.”

What we have been asking leading up to the Okinawa conference is, *What if gerontology could be the door through which we come to understand not only human aging but human life? What would we add or subtract in the curriculum? How would we shift our stance or point of reference in facing our subject matter?*

Clearly, this has become a “work in progress.” After many hours of meetings and months of communication, our group suggested adding three subject areas to the core curriculum, calling them “vectors” to suggest interactive, reciprocal paths between them and people: business, information technology/communication, and education. Each may profoundly alter the experience of aging and, vice versa, the aging of the population may precipitate profound changes in their operation; so, for instance, technology might enable watchful caregiving at a distance through in-home sensors like those currently in teapots in Japan which signal family members when the pot is not lifted for the elder’s daily cup of tea, and education might be the vehicle for lifelong learning or quests after the purpose of life for some older adults; reciprocally, larger numbers of questing adults or tech-savvy Baby Boomers growing old may transform education and technology, etc.

As important as these additional three vectors might be for fostering a fuller appreciation of the opportunities of aging, something was still missing. A core curriculum expanded in this way might help us to appreciate and understand the potential of human aging and the “gift of time,” but this whole effort of learning about what it means to grow older must

include something more, we decided, if it is to reflect the processes that many who are older are undertaking; it must include a spiritual focus, for many are experiencing in their own lives as they age a growing awareness that there is more to life than the social part of their lives, more to life than the business part, more than the technology and ever-evolving devices.

There is at the center of life, many people realize as they age, a piece of something that has always existed, something that has endured since before the beginning of time. Psychoanalysts of the last 100 years or so have called this center of our being the “self.” They distinguish the self as at the core or center of being, quite different from the “persona.” The persona is what we can easily see when we look around. It is the stuff of traditional gerontology. The persona is the mask of the person, the acquired style, attitudes, and behaviors that most of us simply put on, like a business suit, because our choices were shaped and limited by our parents, our teachers, our friends and bosses. By mature life this mask may have grown quite elaborate and much of standard gerontology focuses on it, sometimes with exhaustive descriptive statistics. But some of us, if not the majority, know as we grow older that deep inside we are more. There is a self that we search to find as we age. We have to be sensitive to this voice inside us that asks, when we succeed or when we grow richer or when we marry or retire, “Is this all there is?” Perhaps we have to live a certain number of years to realize this. Perhaps the field of gerontology does, too.

And so, in Okinawa we acknowledged out loud that a curriculum about gerontology, the study of aging, should include more than just an expanded core of subject matter. A curriculum on aging should include a way to help those of us who are not old to understand the importance for many who are old of this search for the infinite, the true self, the oneness, the spirit, or the divine, at the core of life; and a curriculum on aging should help those of us who are old to make this search.

Our colleagues in Okinawa used the Japanese words *soreigaku* and *kigatsuku* when discussing curriculum reformulation. The rough translation of these words is, respectively, understanding with the heart, an emotional intelligence, if you will, and doing the right thing without being told. These may be “lost in translation” to American ears. But I think that in reconsidering and re-conceptualizing what gerontology is or could be, in preparation to planting it over there, we may have uncovered something central that has been missing over here.