

The Challenge of Aging Robinsons on Parallel

The young are prejudiced toward the old! One of the many provocative statements that prompted us participants to think in the class on Aging and Adlerian Psychology, taught by G. William “Bill” Linden, Ph. D., at ICASSI in Lithuania. ICASSI is the International Adlerian Summer School Institute held every summer in a county of its participants. Bill, a young man in his early 80’s taught the thought provoking class to folks from Russia, Iran, Germany, and the US.

Bill’s goal among others is that people around him won’t have apprehension of aging. “Look it in the face, weigh the positive and negative realities, and make the best of what comes” seemed to be his approach. Gleaning wisdom from all sources, we learned to appreciate the depth and breadth of Bill’s personal experience and training in philosophy.

Seeing things from another’s point of view-- a goal that brought us to the Sioux saying, “One can’t understand a person until you’ve walked in his moccasins for 5 miles.” Or put another way, “to see with the eyes of another; to hear with the ears of another; to feel with the heart of another,” is a skill often called empathy. Empathy will serve those who are younger than the elderly well. (We all will be elderly one day, if we aren’t already there.)

Studying aging is a necessity for counselors and psychologists: **The highest rate of suicide in men is in the teenage years and in the elderly.** What’s up with this? We were about to study the possible reasons, and we did for a week of our own personal reflection and attitudes toward the elderly.

The first and most profound of activities was the “Life Harvesting” process that Dr. Linden had found in a book by Zalman Schafer-Shalomi and Ronald Miller, called From Aging to Sage-ing. We participants listed persons and events from our lives, ages 1-7, 7-14, 14-21, 21-28, in seven-year increments right up until age 84. Beside the event, we wrote the meaning it had to us; then the wisdom we could now “harvest” from it.

I personally had a wonderful time with this assignment for I am an amateur philosopher and wisdom seeker. There was the time in grade school when we students had been acting out and our teacher, whom none of us liked very much, cried because she was so frustrated. My take on that lesson was that even folks we don’t like are human and have feelings. On reflecting on those who laughed at her (later and on the sly) did not care about or understand her feelings as I did; the wisdom I gained from that experience was that not everyone cares for others’ feelings.

Other times in my life showed some rejection from husband, partners, friends in which I thought my life was shattered with the pain. I would have done anything to repair the relationships, but I leaned that others’ feelings are not in my control, and there comes a

time to move on and concentrate on surviving. Many years later I see that I gained a confidence in making it on my own that I could not learn any other way.

I looked back at my father and my mother who even though I did not always behave, as they would have liked, never judged or scolded me after I was an adult. I learned that family relationships are more important than outward judgment.

In tying the Life Harvesting activity all together, Bill reminded us that there are THREE LIFE TASKS: Work, Love/Intimacy, Friendship. These processes are never completed. The success of these three challenges and joys of life depends on how one uses the very powerful tool of “social interest”—how focused one becomes on the interaction between self and others.

Through the weeklong course we wrote our obituaries; we discussed how we would like to die; we pondered our personal attitudes about death and dying; we delved into forgiveness as a hurdle to overcome. For those of us who think we are immortal and that death will not come to us even though we see, feel, and hear the signs that we are aging, it is useful to be realistic.

The books referenced in the course and recommended for further reading are From Aging to Sage-ing by Zalman Schafer-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller (Dec, 1997) and Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life by George E. Valliant (Jan, 2003), available in used paperback for very little at Amazon.com.