

SAC Conference Underscores Elders' Needs for Meaning and Purpose

Senior Digest, November 2014

Thinking about aging, I wonder “Will I outlive my savings?” and “Can I stay healthy?” I believe many people share my concerns. Barbara Howard, in her keynote address at our recent Senior Conference, urged us to think and plan for our aging from another perspective. Citing survey research of retirees, she said that “meaning trumps money.” In short, while having adequate savings is important, finding meaning and purpose in our lives as we age is even more important to our well-being.

Barbara’s presentation drew extensively on Viktor Frankl’s book “Man’s Search for Meaning,” which some have called the most important book written in the twentieth century. Frankl was a psychiatrist who survived the Nazi death camps, who writes of lessons he learned as an inmate of Auschwitz and Dachau. One of his seminal observations was that those inmates who had compelling reasons to continue living were much more likely to survive. Those reasons were various: some had hope, however slim, that their loved ones had survived the Holocaust; others yearned to survive and complete an important life’s work that was unfinished—two things that sustained him. To him this explained why many sicker, frailer inmates outlived others who appeared healthier but who knew that their families had been murdered and had nothing to look forward to. From these experiences Frankl developed an approach to psychotherapy founded on the principle that “You can endure any suffering if you know your life has meaning.”

Barbara Howard suggested that when we ponder “what do I do next?” as retirement nears, we must search for meaning and purpose to answer that question. She said we should ask ourselves questions like “How can I do work that makes a difference in people’s lives?” and “How can I become a more creative person?” She added that answering these questions takes reflection, courage and recognition that for each of us what’s meaningful is somewhat unique.

Howard pointed out that the importance of seeking purpose and meaning is also, in current parlance, “evidence-based.” She reported that research showed seniors who had a sense of purpose in their lives are more likely to be healthy, 2.4 times more likely to remain free of Alzheimer’s, are less likely to develop mild cognitive impairment, and less likely to develop disabilities than seniors who reported a lack of purpose and meaning in their lives.

I have worked as a social worker most of my life. But for seven years I tried a career as a computer programmer and analyst. It was a fast-paced environment. Most of my colleagues seemed focused on their careers and little else. When I was leaving to return to social work, at my going-away party several of my hardest-charging friends approached me and confided, “You’re lucky to be going back to what you really want to do—helping people. I wish I could do

that." I realized, to my surprise, how many of us have a deep hunger to do more meaningful things with our lives. As seniors, many of us now have a chance to "do what we really want to do." Let's go for it.