

# Humanism and Aging

— Spyros Damascos

**H**umanism is an outlook on life rather than a school of philosophy per se. “The humanists,” writes Abrahms “seek insight into life as a means of living more fully themselves, or experiencing knowledgeable and more deeply, and thus being able to impart these techniques and this accrued knowledge and wisdom to others.” (in Victor W. Tumer and Edward H. Bruner, *The Anthropology of Experience*, Chicago: U. Illinois, 1986)

Therefore, aging is an unfolding learning process of experiencing ourselves, environment, nature, the world from various unintentional perspectives which will never be repeated! Aging should be approached not as it is expected, but as experienced. In other words, successful aging is individually defined by one’s interests and subjectively perceived abilities. Barbara Waxman refers to good aging as also requiring metaphysical experiences such as interaction with nature which “rewards us with spiritual rejuvenation and moments of transcendence—antidotes to the finiteness of time.” (“Nature, Spirituality, and Later Life in Literature,” *The Gerontologist*, 39:5, 1991).

In the same context, the strength of our spirituality, religiosity, regardless of its manifestations, does not increase with advancing chronological age or failing health, but it depends on our having successfully addressed existential anxiety (Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957) which stems from our finite being’s estrangement

from surrounding infinity, as well as from the fear of the reunion process in the transformation from being to nonbeing. This is precisely the magnificence and tragedy of our existence, writes Tillich, walking on the edge between existence and mortality, finiteness and infinity; and there is no finite way to infinity, he exalts.

Even recent findings in the continued debate in gerontological empirical research on spirituality, religiosity, and aging are increasingly tilting toward insignificant evidence that we become more spiritual, religious, as we age (e.g., Kyriakos Markides et al., “Aging, Religiosity, and Adjustment: A Longitudinal Analysis,” *Journal of Gerontology*, 38:5, 1987; R. P. Sloan et al., “Religion, Spirituality, and Medicine,” *Lancet*, 1999; Kyriakos Markides et al., “Religion, Aging, and Life Satisfaction: An Eight-Year, Three-Wave Longitudinal Study,” in Harold G. Koenig, *Research on Religion and Aging: An Annotated Bibliography*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995, and M. Brennan and G. Cardinali, “Religiousness and Spirituality in Adaptation to Vision Impairment Among Middle-aged and Older Adults,” in C. Stuenkel, A. Ardit, A. Horowitz, M.A. Lang, B. Rosenthal, and K. Seidman (eds.), *Vision Rehabilitation: Assessment, Intervention, and Outcomes*, Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 2000).

Quite interestingly, Christopher G. Ellison indicates that “existential certainty,” which Krause and others define “as lack of religious doubt” (Neal Krause, Berit Dayton-Ingersoll, Christopher Ellison, and

Keith M. Wulf, “Aging, Religious Doubt, and Psychological Well-Being,” *The Gerontological Society of America*, Vol. 39 No. 5, 525–533), is an influential factor in our emotional and mental well-being (Christopher G. Ellison, “Religious Involvement and Subjective Well-Being,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 32:80–94, 1991).

Tillich asserts that religious doubt is an integral element of faith, a necessary component upon which faith grows stronger, rather than being denied. Existential doubt and faith are axes of the same truth, “the state of ultimate concern . . . and The Courage To Be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.” (Ellison) Thomas’ belief in the resurrection of Christ was reaffirmed after he first doubted it.

Krause’s religious doubt is Ellison’s lack of existential certainty, which is Tillich’s existential anxiety. In Tillich’s writings, existential and pathological anxiety are of the same essence, ontic, the main difference between them stemming from our separation from the infinite, divine, God, whereas the latter is caused by the tribulations of life, alleviated through psychotherapy. Even when pathological anxiety has traces of psychosis, creativity can emerge. This history of human culture, he stresses, frequently demonstrates that neurotic anxiety reaches higher levels of reality that are ordinarily inaccessible through mundane experiences . . . “it has often been said that there are neurotic elements in everybody and that the differences between

*When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of space of which I am not ignorant, and which knows me not, I am frightened, am astonished at being here rather than there, and why now rather than then.* — PASCAL, *Pensées*

the sick and the healthy mind is only a quantitative one.”

Pathological anxiety, he emphasizes, is also ontic in the sense it is related to our determination to affirm ourselves regardless of the fear of nonbeing. It is the triumph of the human spirit ascending, transcending, affirming itself in defiance of its finitude. He further demonstrates that love is the force that reunites the estranged, and since love is the core of religion, he sees religion as the answer to existential anxiety (Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952).

There is absolutely nothing wrong with religion, belief in God, one's creator, if it is springing out from sincere esoteric piety, not exhibitionism and/or political opportunism, especially as a means of oppression; and love's formidable power, whether in religious or laic terms, is indisputable!

Wisdom, maturing with life experiences, enhances our skill to process uncertainty; however, spirituality is not an evolving phenomenon related to any particular age and/or gender, but it is a matter of one's priorities; namely, an existential priority in the sense of permitting ourselves to introspect, explore a possibly dormant esoteric world in need of transcendence, in need of experiencing the dimension of our spirituality emanating from the wonder that is "Zoe" (Life) and the power of our presence in the world. This can be accomplished by attaining a spiritual meaning, which must be achieved by each person individually (Mackenzie D. Brown, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

Frankl espoused the meaning of our existence and the quest for such meaning as the foremost motivation in our life. Man, he wrote, lives and is willing to die in defense of his or her ideals and values (Victor E. Frankl, *Man's*

*Search for Meaning*, New York: First Washington Square Press Printing, February 1985). In other words, man is not a mere unsolved equation, but a conscious being empowered by emotions, dreams, aspirations, and what Erich Fromm calls innate basic human needs (Jung would call them archetypes) of transcendence, belongingness, rootedness, and relatedness.

Steward and Mickunas postulate that "dread, care, anguish, guilt, doubt" are understood in terms of lived experiences, thus suggesting that spiritual well-being is attained in transcendence (David Steward and Algis Mickunas, *Exploring Phenomenology*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974). Koenig speaks of the power of esoteric religiosity (Harold G. Koenig, *The Healing Power of Faith*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), and Berman infers that Erik Erikson's point that integrity versus despair is the focus of the older old does not mean that people in general, at any age, will not experience erosion of the belief in themselves, faith in life (Harry J. Berman, *Interpreting the Aging Self: Personal Journals of Later Life*, New York: Springer Publishing Co., Inc., 1994). Quite the contrary, Berman underlines, Erikson's model clearly indicates the ever-present threat of becoming overwhelmed by despondency, nihilism.

Yalom, concurring, suggests that the means of effectively addressing such feelings are based on individual factors (Irvin D. Yalom, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, New York: Basic Books, 1989).

Franz Kafka, in his Dearest Father letter, writes: "Every human being is here asked two questions of creed: First, as to the credibility of this life; second, as to the credibility of his goal." (Franz Kafka, "Dearest Father," in Maurice Friedman, ed., *The Worlds of Existentialism*, Atlantic Highlands,

New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1991).

How credible are our motives, goals? How sincere are we to ourselves and others? Under what conditions would you define having attained feeling at ease with yourself, others, nature, and the Divine as you perceive it? In what way do we, individually, seek God? And where? Out there in the vast universe? Within ourselves? Coleman believes that the very mystery of life constitutes it "religiously awesome." (Earl J. Coleman, *Spirituality and Creativity: Bond Between Art and Religion*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998). Awesome is the power, sanctity, self-responsibility, and self-determinism of existence. The very essence of all life in all of its forms is Sacred, Divine; and permitting ourselves to experience its awesome power enhances our horizon of perception, sense of spirituality, and humbleness.

If we were not present in this world to experience its drama of creation, beauty, and rejuvenation through repose, would it matter if it existed? This is precisely the awesome power of spiritual intersubjectivity: the world exists because we, humans, are experiencing it, and we exist because we are being experienced by the world.

*Many are the wonders of the world, but none more wondrous than man. Man is the measure of all things.* — Anaxagoras 428 B.C.

*Life is the measure of all things. Life! And what we do with it.* —

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