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The Grateful Aging Program: A Naturalistic Model of Transformation and Healing into the Second Half of Life

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Abstract

Objectives:

Understanding and managing the process of aging is a central issue in modern society. This is a critical factor given the demographic shift toward an aging population and the negative stereotypes around aging that can limit people's worldview on aging with gratitude and well-being.

Methods:

Building on three decades of qualitative and quantitative studies on positive worldview transformation at the California-based Institute of Noetic Sciences, this article applies an empirically derived naturalistic model of transformation to aging. The Grateful Aging Program is introduced as a set of transformative steps to promote well-being and to shift fear of aging into inspiration for living well.

Results:

Nine steps to Grateful Aging are identified: 1) answer the call to transformation, 2) cultivate curiosity, 3) formalize a Grateful Aging practice, 4) set intention for Grateful Aging, 5) pay attention to the gifts of aging, 6) build Grateful Aging habits, 7) find guidance, 8) move to acceptance, and 9) transform self and society. Educational programs are described for elderly patients and for the health care professionals who serve them.

Conclusion:

The Grateful Aging Program is designed to expand awareness of healthy, mindful, and meaningful aging; to promote individual and social well-being; and to facilitate a supportive atmosphere for personal enrichment and shared learning.

INTRODUCTION

We are alive at an unparalleled moment in human history. An enormous wave of change washes over us. As the demographic facts reveal, our world has an aging population—an unprecedented increase in the average age of people in the US and throughout the world. The number of people ages 65 years and

older is projected to triple by midcentury, from 531 million in 2010 to 1.5 billion in 2050.¹ In the US, the population of seniors is expected to double by 2050, from 41 to 86 million, according to the Pew Research Report.¹ Between 1900 and 2010, life expectancy rose from age 47 to 78.6 years. Advances in medicine, including biological and pharmacologic developments, lead an ongoing longevity revolution.²

The Baby Boomers, those born between 1946 to 1964, rush toward retirement age; as of January 1, 2011, approximately 10,000 Baby Boomers reach age 65 years every day, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging.³ Many Baby Boomers, a group characterized by individualism, are looking for innovative ways to redefine their identity. As they confront their own existential issues, Baby Boomers seek new sources of meaning and purpose. Many pursue a self-reflective quest for wholeness, exploring diverse practices and approaches to forge their own truth system; some return to their faith of origin, whereas others seek a new spiritual path.⁴ Members of the Baby Boomer generation typically share an expectation that old age could be better. To make it so, they are open to developing new skills and ways of aging with gratefulness and well-being. For many, an emerging spirituality combines traditional religion with individualized personal practice.⁴

Some call this demographic shift a silver tsunami.⁵ Although poetic, this metaphor speaks to a cultural fear of aging. It reveals a limited worldview ripe with negative stereotypes affecting attitudes, intentions, behaviors, physical health, and personal well-being. Most importantly, it limits the ability to see the gifts of living longer and healthier than ever before.

It is time to challenge our cultural assumptions about aging. By shifting our worldviews from fear to inspiration, we can see this demographic shift—and our place in it—as an opportunity for immense personal and collective growth and transformation.⁶ As each of us confronts aging—our own or that of others—we find creative ways of living and being in the world. We sense that there is more to our existence—more layers or dimensions than we comprehend in our daily lives. For some, this awakens an embrace of meaning and purpose fostering our kinship—or interconnectedness—with a greater whole. Many of us speak up for a new model of aging conceived as a great awakening.

We have a unique gift of life, yet we are all mortal, facing aging and changes that are part of our human unfolding. We all hold some model, even if not fully formed, about our entry into advanced years, and we consider our legacy.

As we contemplate our models, we can promote in ourselves—and in our collective engagement—a more compassionate and peaceful way of life that embraces its various stages. It is at the meeting place of science and spiritual wisdom that we discover a new paradigm, which sheds light on aging gratefully. Of course, to engage in our own positive transformation requires cultivating a growth-oriented mindset, which increases with age.⁷

EXAMINING WORLDVIEWS ON AGING

The Grateful Aging Program (GAP) is based on a model developed from research conducted over several decades at the Institute of Noetic Sciences in Petaluma, CA, that examines positive transformations in worldviews. The program uses qualitative and quantitative research methods. The research goal was to understand the process by which people experience fundamental shifts in perception that alter how they view and interact with themselves and the world around them. In particular, a multidisciplinary team investigated factors that facilitate worldview transformations that result in an increased sense of well-being, quality of life, and pro-social behavior for participants. This work led to the development of a naturalistic model of worldview transformation.⁸ Previous theories of development suggest that as people grow and interact with the world, they learn to categorize, discriminate, and generalize about what they see and feel.⁸ A worldview emerges that combines

beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, values, stereotypes, and ideas to construct complex conceptual frameworks that organize lived experience. Together they create a meaning system for individuals to make sense of their past, present, and future.⁹

Worldviews both affect and are affected by individual and collective goals and desires. These lenses of perception shape what people know and how they know it, both consciously and unconsciously. Worldviews inform human behavior in relationships, orchestrating individual and social actions and reactions at all times. They guide fundamental habits of self-reflection, our understanding of self and other, and the means by which people share meaning and actions in the world. Worldviews guide the questions people ask, how they learn and grow, and how they make sense of their experiences. These views are dynamic and capable of change throughout the course of life.

The research finds that shifts in world-view begin long before most people are aware of any change. Life transitions, peak experiences, and numinous or mystical moments—all are primers, even if not directly experienced as transformative, and lay the groundwork for what is to come. Even when people point to a pivotal moment in their lives, they often identify, in retrospect, a “destabilizer”—a combination of factors that set the stage.

A specific episode, period of life, or series of experiences culminate in an “aha!” moment.^{10,11} Whether stunning beauty or deep pain or loss, such as the death of a loved one or diagnosis of a life-threatening disease, this aha! moment challenges people’s assumptions and changes their view of the world.⁸ Attempts to fit new experiences or realizations into their old perspective fail, forcing expansion of their awareness to allow the new insight. Aging and the reflection on the inevitable nature of bodily decline and death offer such opportunities to broaden and deepen our understanding of what gives us meaning and purpose in life.

Although transformative moments leading to insight redouble efforts to protect against destabilization, they also inspire an entirely new worldview that is capable of giving meaning to what happened. This leads people to explore and engage their insights; it is important for people to embark on practices to integrate insights as the transformative path unfolds. These practices may be psychological, physical, religious, or social in nature. Ultimately, they call for an embracing of our shared human experiences and interconnectedness—a call that is timely and relevant to our aging population.

GRATEFUL AGING DEFINED

The GAP builds on a growing movement to bring greater awareness to aging and the potential for growth and transformation.⁶ This is a philosophy of life and a set of transformative practices for awakening to later life.

As anthropologist Angeles Arrien^{12p4} wrote, aging can be thought of as a kind of ultimate initiation. “In it, we encounter new, unexpected, unfamiliar, and unknowable moments that remind us that we are a sacred mystery made manifest.” Arrien^{12p4} urges us to embrace aging as “an enormous opportunity to develop and embody wisdom and character. We enjoy limitless possibilities to restore, renew, and heal ourselves. And because of our increased longevity, for the first time in history we also have the opportunity to create a map of spiritual maturity for future generations to use as they enter their own later years.”

As a philosophy, the GAP embraces the fullness of life—and all its complexities. Grounded in transpersonal and humanistic psychology,^{13–15} Grateful Aging helps us develop our human awareness and live fully into human potentials that emerge throughout our lifespan.^{7,16} It recognizes human psychological and spiritual development as unfolding over time, although by no means a linear process.¹⁷ Ultimately, learning to live with gratefulness is part of a continuous process of waking up to life.¹⁸

The GAP is an integral process that each of us has within our grasp. Aging from this perspective can be understood and experienced at multiple levels, including our individual and our shared understanding.^{19–21} It includes the many dimensions that we are—our bodies, minds, and spirits—and the society in which we live. It is an invitation to live with a spirit of wonder and surprise about the mystery of life.

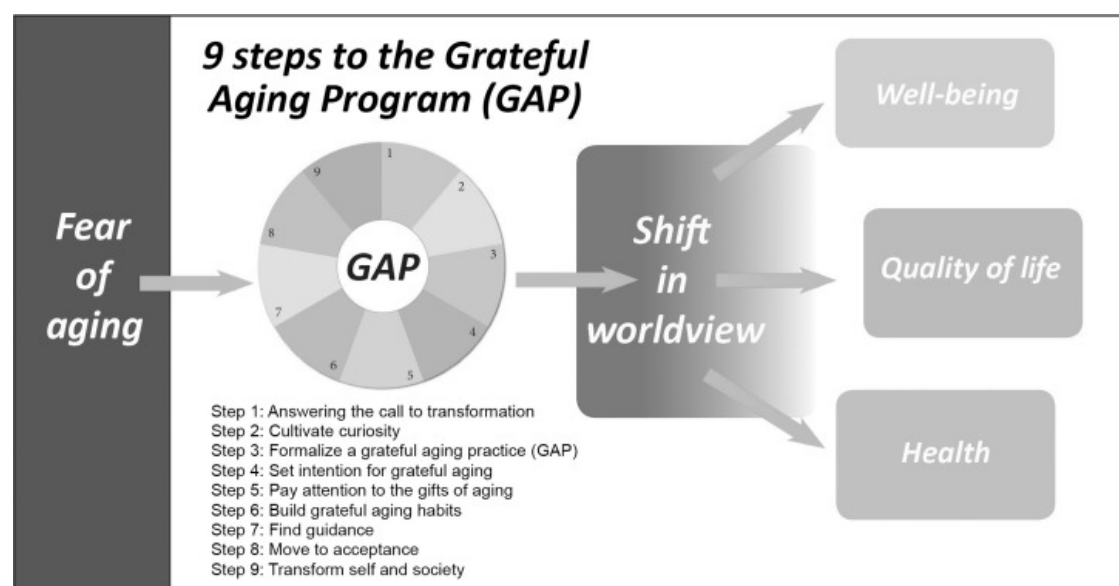
As well as a philosophy, the GAP is a transformative practice. Embracing our human development allows us to consciously transform our fears about aging and mortality into inspirations for living—and dying well.²² Bringing mindfulness and awareness to our worldviews, the GAP offers new ways of considering our lived experiences, including pain and suffering, by developing gratitude and appreciation for the transformative potentials that come throughout the lifespan. It involves an intentional approach in which we seek to use our own embodiment as an inspiration for growth and well-being.

GRATEFUL AGING AS A TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

As a fundamental aspect of worldview transformation, the GAP introduces a series of steps that can be embraced every day, alone or in community, to fully engage the aging process. It invites us to cultivate our inner landscape, our consciousness, in ways that address our outer complexities. It is a call to transformation. The nine steps of the GAP offer a way to deepen our insights, cultivate our resilience, enhance our well-being, and grow in the face of challenge and uncertainty ([Figure 1](#), Sidebar: [Nine Steps to the Grateful Aging Program](#)).

Nine Steps to the Grateful Aging Program

1. Answering the Call
2. Curiosity
3. Practice
4. Intention
5. Gifts of Aging
6. Habits
7. Guidance
8. Acceptance
9. Self and Society



[Figure 1.](#)

The Grateful Aging Program (GAP) transformation model.

Step One:

Answer the Call to Transformation The first step in the GAP is to bring attention to our worldview and how it defines our experience. Worldviews function at an implicit level, under the surface of conscious awareness. Through inquiry and self-examination, people become aware of worldviews that limit or enhance their daily experience of life.²³ Gerald Jampolsky^{24p13} notes in *Love is Letting Go of Fear*: “To perceive the world differently, we must be willing to change our belief system, let the past slip away, expand our sense of now, and dissolve the fear in our minds.”

However, it can be hard to change our belief system. A useful way to start is to question our assumptions about aging, leading us from certainty to a kind of beginner’s mind. Is the glass half-empty or half-full? Alan Alda²⁵ expressed so clearly in his memoir on aging, “Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while, or the light won’t come in.” As we invite in the light, we begin to plant seeds for personal growth and development. Rather than resisting change, which can be a source of suffering and discontent, we embrace possibilities from the unknown. We move from surviving to thriving in the rich soil of new possibilities.

Step Two:

Cultivate Curiosity Finding surprise and wonder in life is a vital step in developing a Grateful Aging practice. Here the goal is to seek surprises, practice a beginner’s mind, and learn new things about oneself and others.

This step in the GAP asks that we not take things for granted, that we instead stay open to the unknown. Brother David Steindl-Rast,¹⁸ a Benedictine monk, described the power of surprise to awaken and experience gratefulness. In his book, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, the insightful teacher describes a personal incident that shifted his worldview. Having grown up in Nazi-occupied Austria, he recalls a narrow escape when bombs exploded, and he was without shelter. Surviving, he stepped past the rubble and dusted off his clothes. As he ventured into the spring day, he was

overwhelmed by surprise. In front of him was a small patch of grass, unscathed by the destruction. In his words, “It was as if a friend had offered me an emerald in the hollow of his hand. Never before or after have I seen grass so surprisingly green.”^{18p10} Noticing the surprise in something as simple as a patch of green grass opened him to a lifelong practice of gratefulness. In the midst of war, this observation served as a profound spiritual epiphany that catalyzed his transformative journey toward waking up to the gift of life.

One useful way to engage this step of the GAP is to notice one new thing each day, finding an opportunity to be surprised and to feel truly awake in the moment. As you bring curiosity and surprise into your awareness, allow inspiration to strike you. You may find treasures seeing the interdependence of life. Nourish the rumblings in you that long for greater truth, wholeness, and well-being.

Step Three:

Formalize a Grateful Aging Practice The first 2 steps are precursors that draw us toward a formal transformative practice. With the groundwork laid, we develop insights that take us deeper into our being. Commonly, however, simple awareness of our worldview is not enough to make positive shifts in perspective. Our awakening can be dulled without the scaffolding to attune to the mysteries of life. Step 3 of the GAP invites us to build a new set of intentions and habits that formalize our commitment to aging as a profound transformative practice.

Research among the world’s spiritual and religious traditions reveals that transformative practices can take many forms.⁸ They include inner-directed practices, such as meditation, affirmations, visualizations, mindful breathing exercises known as breathwork, and contemplative prayer, each of which can help shift our awareness to our subjective experiences ([Table 1](#)). They also include outer-directed practices to focus on our shared experiences and physical embodiment (see [Table 1](#)). Such practices include social engagement, dancing, chanting, exercising, events, and participating in authentic conversations with others.

Table 1.

Practice directions

| Inner practices | Outer practices |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Meditation | Social engagement |
| Affirmations | Dancing |
| Visualizations | Exercising |
| Mindful breathwork | Authentic communication |
| Contemplative prayer | Events |

Step Four:

Set Intention for Grateful Aging As you feel the call to Grateful Aging, you can begin to formulate your own intention statement.²⁶ Where would you like to grow? What needs healing in your life and in your worldview? Are there stereotypes about aging that are limiting you from awakening to your own well-being?

Intentions involve the ways in which we bring will and purpose to our actions and reactions. By setting intentions, we chart the course toward an engagement in our own aging process. How can we move, as Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi and co-author Miller²⁷ suggest, from “age-ing to sage-ing,” fully owning our wisdom and life experience?

Grounded in our worldviews, our intentions shape our behaviors. These include both our inner-directed intentions and our action-in-the-world intentions. Inner-directed intentions are vital as we seek truth and meaning in our lives. Looking inward and reflecting on our intuitions, insights, and revelations help us connect with what gives us deep meaning and purpose. We see the certain habits of mind that support us and other habits that limit our awakening. Setting the intention to move from fear and suffering to growth and possibility requires effort. This may include turning off the radio, finding quiet time to self-reflect, or practicing positive affirmations and focused prayer. It may also include setting a goal to engage with others in order to share in life’s adventures.

Step Five:

Pay Attention to the Gifts of Aging Training our attention to focus on what we often do not notice is one of the trickiest aspects of worldview transformation. Because much of what shapes our world-view lies below the level of our conscious awareness, we can be blinded to our own stereotypes and negative perceptions.

An important key to the GAP is the flexibility to become aware of what we are often unaware of—much that transpires around us and within us. However, we can set the intention to pay attention to those things we take for granted. Instead of operating on autopilot, we engage in mindfulness about happenings around us, right in the moment. Through meditation and self-reflection, as well as dialogue with others, we bring our awareness to limiting beliefs and actions. Actively noticing new things in the present releases us from negative thoughts and evaluations that cause upset or worry. We begin to identify assumptions, beliefs, and expectations that restrict our sense of purpose and well-being. Classic studies by Ellen Langer,²⁸ described in her book, *Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*, speak to this point. She found that elderly men could improve their health by simply acting as if it were 20 years earlier. This finding reveals that our expectations about aging can shape our physical and psychological experiences.

Step Six:

Build Grateful Aging Habits Our brains lay down neuropathways based on repetitive actions and thoughts. The more we do something, the easier and more routine it becomes. This is true of both negative and positive thoughts and behaviors. It was long thought that these pathways were fixed and would not change with maturity. However, the new science of neuroplasticity has shown that we create new neuropathways that affirm our lived experiences and help us to build new, healthy habits. Engaging in practices that support Grateful Aging make positive, healthy, and life-affirming aging our habitual way of being.

By moving and exercising our bodies, we stay healthy and alert. Building a routine for staying fit—walking, dancing, yoga, and eating well—makes us feel better and live healthier. This involves both intention to create healthy lifestyles, and attention to what we do and how we do it. We begin to trust the wisdom of our bodies to keep us moving in a positive direction.

Building mental habits is also part of the GAP. Studies reveal that through mindfulness, or being present in the moment, we feel happier and worry less. We may use affirmations to help us feel optimism and a sense of hope for how we grow and age with purpose and meaning. By finding ways to

cultivate compassion for ourselves and others, we let go of troubling thoughts and feelings, choosing to live this day with peace, love, and gratitude. A simple affirmation, such as one from Jampolsky,²⁴ “This day I choose to spend in perfect peace,” can shift our perspective.

Finding opportunities to live in positive social interactions builds positive habits. Our connections heal us, and we feel engaged rather than isolated and alone. This involves ways of being with others free from judgment, releasing grudges, and finding compassion for the lives we have all led. Cultivating forgiveness for ourselves and for others allows us to let go of hurt feelings, thoughts, and emotions that keep us from being present in the moment. Practicing active listening during meaningful conversations, while also sharing our own stories from the heart, can lead to genuine intimacy and deep caring.

Finally, we can build habits that connect us to our spiritual nature. This may be a religious practice that provides faith-based rituals and guidelines. It may also be something more individualistic, including our own sense of connection to something greater than ourselves. Finding meaning and purpose beyond our own ego identification expands our sense of self. For some, it is a deep ecology, to connect to the natural world and feel part of an interconnected universe.^{9,29}

Step Seven:

Find Guidance Building new ways of thinking, feeling, and being in the world can come naturally for some of us. Others find guidance and inspiration from those who have been along the path. Seek out wisdom holders by attending lectures, reading books, listening to podcasts, or making new friends who have the characteristics we aspire to develop. Finding a GAP community or creating a study group offers the social networks to engage in mutual shifts in our worldviews. These sources of external guidance can offer hope and inspiration.

Just as external guidance supports us in building new habits and ways of engaging the world, it is also essential to build inner guidance as we engage in the GAP. Finding ways to self-reflect and seek times of silence and contemplation can offer new insights and a feeling of peace. Breathing practices clear our minds, bring us into the present, reduce stress and anxiety, and center our bodies. Focusing on each breath, letting go of extraneous thoughts that limit you, and following this practice every day can lead to measurable positive changes in your body and mind. This breathing can be done sitting still or walking.

Step Eight:

Move to Acceptance The essence of worldview transformation is to shift our perspective on change. Resisting change can lead to anxiety and harmful stress. Most people seek stability. We want things the same, thinking we can control them. However, change is a constant in all dimensions of life. It often leads us to feel more out of control, without the inner resources to ride the tides of change.

The GAP invites us to move with the flow of change, adapting and staying open to what may lie ahead. This includes our responses to loss, grief, and suffering. Contemplating death is a vital aspect of Grateful Aging. Although it may be surrounded in fear, death is an inevitable part of transformation.^{22,30} Holding a cosmology of death helps to create a frame that holds our mortality.

The fear of aging and of dying can lead people to deny the nature of our shared humanness, including our mortality. There are transformative potentials in age and death awareness that can shift fear into inspiration and action. Physician Robert Butler^{31p23} pointed out: “The human desire is not to take longer to die but to live longer in good health through deferral of non-fatal as well as fatal conditions.” This is the opportunity of the GAP: live life fully and without anxiety about our mortality. Evidence

points to the benefits of acceptance of our mortality. A pilot study exploring death awareness through an online training found changes in language use through journaling that indicated a reduction in anxiety and a shift in personal identification with writing about mortality.³²

Waking each morning is an opportunity to cultivate gratitude and to nurture self-compassion. As we give up our need to control all events and life circumstances, we may find a path to forgiveness for ourselves and for others. We can change our story, embracing what unfolds with curiosity and wonder. Engaging in conversations with other GAP practitioners can clear a path for understanding and sharing that understanding. It is a great relief to consider that everything is perfect, just as it is. You can breathe into it and feel a load lifting off your shoulders.

Step Nine:

Transform Self and Society As we all know, shifting our world-views is not simple or easy. With the steps developed in this GAP model, it is possible to create a lifestyle and worldview that embraces the fullness of life in all its stages. Transformative practices are often associated with certain places or times of the season. The GAP, however, is a lifelong practice best understood in the context of our everyday life. The program is an opportunity to expand our self-understanding, through self-reflection and in the company of others who offer mutual support and encouragement. Finding sources of social support online or in social settings, such as family gatherings and senior citizen programs, offer vital ways of engaging new patterns and behaviors.

Although aging is personal and based in our individual life experiences, Grateful Aging sees the worldview shift as more than a personal quest. There are personal and social benefits as we experience the shift in focus from I to we.^{29,33} In other words, the practice of Grateful Aging infuses our lives with the wish for, and active actions that speak to, the transformation of our community. Compassion and altruism emerge from our shared experiences rather than from duty or obligation.

As people move from equanimity and self-compassion in the face of life's challenges to a daily sense of wonder and awe, most mundane aspects of life become sacred in their own way. The GAP makes personal transformation contagious. As people share their insights and experiences with others, a collective transformation emerges that stimulates more individual transformations, in an ever-widening expansion of our human potential.⁶ As people engage in Grateful Aging, they bring greater awareness to the transformative process that allows a deeper experience of their life journey. Expanding wisdom allows each of us to heal, to forgive, and to experience compassion for self and others.

DISCUSSION

Early models of human development focused on child development, and psychological maturity was considered to be largely complete by adulthood. More recent theories, grounded in empirical data, recognize that we continue to change and grow throughout our lives. The question then becomes, how can we use the challenges and opportunities of aging to cultivate wisdom and to live deeply? In the end, it is not as much about aging itself as it is about fostering our personal and shared awakening.

With the GAP, I applied a naturalistic model of worldview transformation^{5,7} to the aging process. I have developed the concept of the GAP as a transformative practice that invites realizations, enhanced well-being, improved quality of life, and greater health for people as they move through developmental steps that connect body, mind, society, and spirit.

This model is now used to develop enrichment programs for seniors and for continuing education for health care professionals as they engage their aging patient population. The intention of the GAP is to bring greater awareness to our beliefs and expectations about aging in the context of a supportive community that supports well-being, growth, and awakening. When brought to almost any activity,

whether explicitly personal growth-oriented or not, these nine steps to Grateful Aging make day-to-day activities, such as walking, gardening, journaling, golf, book clubs, and learning programs pathways toward positive transformation.

CONCLUSION

As the quote on aging by an underdetermined source reminds us: “You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.” May we dream together as we move through our second half of life, both individually and as a collective force for change in the world.

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Footnotes

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A Human Skill

To get old is in the hands of God, but to stay young is a human skill.

— Croatian proverb

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