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Compassion and connection shape Estela Moreno's purpose.

THE ENGAGED AGE

Compassion and connection shape one woman's engaged, well-lived life

By Alison Biggar

Estela Moreno knows how to age well. Without consciously adhering to the latest aging research, she sings, volunteers, pursues new skills, travels, picks up new languages—all while maintaining a tight-knit family life.

Her father immigrated to San Francisco from Mexico and in 1963 sent for his wife and six children when Moreno was 14. In middle school at James Lick she struggled with English but a new friend told her that by using “all five senses”—speaking, recording, listening, reading and repeating—she could pick up the language more rapidly. This method worked and after eight months she transferred to Mission High, eventually graduating with her class.

Moreno married at 20, and got a job at AT&T while her husband worked for United Airlines. They spent the early years of their marriage traveling before settling down and having two daughters. At age 28 she was widowed—her husband murdered—and she never remarried.

Forging a New Life

But Moreno's is a story of resilience and re-connection, not loss. After her husband's death, her parents had wanted her to move in with them, but “they had their [traditional] ways,” she says, and, “I was always wanting to try new things.”

She went to night school for a year, studying psychology to help figure out how to raise two girls alone. Between her husband's life insurance and Social Security

benefits, Moreno realized she could afford to quit work and go back to school.

In 1980, she enrolled in school full time, ensuring her classes coincided with the girls' school schedules. She was an involved parent—serving as president of the mother's club, working for the PTA and every night sitting down with her girls to work on her homework as they did theirs. “It paid off,” she says, “both girls went to college and I got my master's.”

Armed with a master's in clinical social work she volunteered at a hotline for parents who were at their wits' end. “We would try to de-escalate them,” Moreno says, “to get them to a place where they would join a support or parenting group.” This experience eventually segued into a job with the City and County of San Francisco doing assessments on suicidal children and teens, connecting them to short-term and long-term services. For 15 years, at any time of the day or night, Moreno (a self-styled, problem-solving “crisis junkie”) was called into people's homes, juvenile hall and schools to assess kids in crisis.

Moreno retired early to care for her parents—first, her mom, who had cancer and died at 87, then her father, who died at 89. Now, Moreno's experience and skills are aimed at older adults.

Life After Caregiving: New Connections

After her father's death, Moreno lacked focus. Her sister sent her a link for San Francisco's Parks and Recreation Department and she soon started sign-



Estela Moreno (second from left) shows her 49ers spirit with her daughter Ericka (left), grandson Javier and niece Nena.

ing up for all sorts of classes. In Quigong she met a woman who mentioned the Community Music Center 30th Street Chorus. Once she saw the choir perform, she desperately “wanted to be part of that community.”

Every night she sat down to work on her homework while her daughters did theirs.

The 40-member choir is for people older than age 55, rehearses weekly and performs in the community, singing popular and folk music from Latin America, the United States and the Philippines. “Never in my life did I sing,” Moreno says, but after a brief spell, the director noticed her advanced communication skills and recruited her to be an assistant.

Moreno acts as chauffeur to several older choir members, driving them to performances in the community or to doctor appointments. And she's a social worker to the rest. “All I do is when I arrive [at rehearsal] is I say hello, give them a kiss, and whenever something is happening to them they come to me. They feel okay to ask me for things and ask me about things that bother them in their life,” she says.

“I'm always available during the day for whatever choir members need.” Nights and weekends she reserves for her family, often assisting with her four grandkids.

How she fits in the rest of her activities is a mystery, but somehow Moreno shares 49ers (“this year was horrible!”) and Giants season tickets, ballet and symphony season tickets and travels the world with a group of friends, who also are avid moviegoers while at home.

“I'm happy with my life right now,” she says. “I go to the Excelsior Senior Center and I see how many seniors are just getting by. They don't have the ability to walk, some of them, so when I see that my heart just goes ‘Awww, what can I do for these people?’ Especially people of color who came to this country Because they have worked so hard, they live to work, and now they [say that they] don't want to live.”

When Moreno hears them talk like that, she sits down with them and asks them about what they like to do. “I didn't know I wanted to sing, or [even] liked music,” she tells them. “[I say] ‘Start with the little things. If you have a friend [try to] get together just once a week. Just try to connect with something—with somebody.’” ■

Photo: Courtesy of the Community Music Center

Spirituality: an essential element of aging well

By Katrina Leathers

At age 75, Diane still lives in the northeast town where she raised her kids. Although they have gone and her house has sold, she stays on through frigid winters and sweltering summers. What keeps her there? Her spiritual community. For years, she has attended spiritual groups with a diverse, interfaith membership and focus. They are a source of connection and sense of purpose, a place to communally contemplate big questions about life's meaning and mysteries. She won't yet leave this community, even to live in a milder climate, near family.

Diane feels lucky to have her community, as it nurtures a spiritual life—an element of well-being often missing in elders' lives. Spirituality takes many forms, from strict religious practice to existential exploration, but spiritual needs are universal and are most significant in life's final stages.

To understand this significance, it helps to define the term spirituality. Spirituality is bigger than religion, and relevant to every person regardless of faith or lack thereof. A good definition comes from a 2009 conference on spiritual care:

"Spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature and to the significant or sacred" (<https://goo.gl/58lKFF>).

This definition throws the net wide, including all forms of spiritual identities. With about 4,200 religions in existence, and a growing portion of people identifying as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR), an interfaith approach to spiri-

ty fosters both physical and emotional well-being. This is the realm of spiritual work.

With about 4,200 religions in existence, an interfaith approach to spirituality is essential.

A full spiritual life includes personal exploration of concerns and beliefs, a regular practice of connection to spirit or meaning and sharing sacred space—being together in the presence of something greater than our small selves. Explorations take varied forms: singing groups, worship services, public art, service projects, discussion groups, meditation classes or talking with a spiritual director or counselor.

Studies Show Proven Benefits

Studies overwhelmingly show that spiritual or religious involvement correlates to increased well-being. A 2014 article in *Religions* by Harold G. Koenig reviews hundreds of studies, reporting that people with a spiritual life have less depression, suicide, alcohol and drug use; and have greater happiness, meaning, purpose, hope and optimism; better physical health; better immune, endocrine and cardiovascular functions; less coronary heart disease and cancer; lower blood pressure; and greater longevity by about seven years (5:4, 2014; <http://goo.gl/>



Photo: iStockphoto.com/Later

ity fosters both physical and emotional well-being.

This impact is greatest in older adults, due to the developmental tasks and challenges of aging. In older age, our task is retrospection and reconciliation with the past. We ask ourselves: What was the point of my life? Was it meaningful, valuable? Did I make a contribution? Was it worth it? Ideally, we accept our failures and disappointments, and find the wisdom that brings peace, accepting all that life was or wasn't.

In this time, we also deal with loss, in health, abilities and agency; our roles and identities change, and we see friends and family members die. Spirituality is an essential tool in gracefully meeting the challenges of loss, disappointment and the need to find peace and reconciliation.

The world's faith traditions and spiritual teachers, ancient and contemporary, whether religious or SBNR, offer profound wisdom for this phase of life. Teachings on acceptance, powerlessness, surrender, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, appreciation and living in the present moment—these are the gifts of spirituality. Chaplains and spiritual counselors draw from this wisdom to support and help people find peace in every phase of life, especially when aging.

Integrating Spirituality into Everyday Life

So, how to bring this wisdom to elders? Spiritual elements can be integrated with-

senior programs. We can employ chaplains or spiritual directors in work settings, or seek them out for consultation; we can bring spiritual considerations into conversations and planning; we can remember the universality of spiritual needs, and let that inspire all that we do and create.

Spirituality is crucial for gracefully meeting late-life challenges of loss, disappointment and reconciliation.

At San Francisco's On Lok Lifeways, an innovative organization serving elders, spirituality is regarded as an essential element of care. An interfaith chaplain conducts individual spiritual assessments, discussing the person's beliefs, their importance and influence, and community connections. This informs the individual's care plan for their spiritual needs.

Regardless of our spiritual identity, we all can expand our understanding of well-being to include the need for meaning, purpose and connectedness. We can tend to the spiritual needs that increase well-being, for ourselves and for all elders we encounter. Thus, we create the possibility for a more peaceful and gratifying old age for everyone. ■

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