

Making meaning in a changing world

By Susan V. Bosak

One morning, early on in the course of Mom’s dementia, she stared at the toaster, slice of bread on a plate, tub of margarine and knife. Plainly she asked, “What does it all mean?”

I looked at her and in a low, confidential voice said, “You know, I ask that a lot, too.”

She smiled and relaxed. Then she went to the cupboard, got a bowl and poured in some cereal, followed by milk.

‘The future is not the responsibility of the young.’

Dementia is about more than losing memory; it’s about losing meaning. Looking at the world, suddenly things like toasters don’t mean anything anymore. So individuals desperately hunt for the things that do mean something. People living with dementia can be very creative in making meaning.

As human beings, making meaning is what we do naturally to navigate life.

Life with Societal Dementia

But what if the world around us increasingly makes less sense—almost like a societal dementia? We’re seeing more existential anxiety in all ages—around climate change, economic instability and social upheaval. “This isn’t how it’s supposed

to be,” we think to ourselves. “Can I afford a place to live?” “Do I have enough money if I get sick?” “How can I be safe with more severe weather, droughts, food scarcity, more drug-resistant illnesses?” “Who can I trust?”

For older adults, this comes at a time of life when already they are struggling with meaning. Psychologist Erik Erikson, in his studies of human development, identified two psychosocial tasks in older adulthood. First, we must come to terms with our own story, the life we have lived (Erikson called it ego integrity). Second, we share a need to create a legacy, which will be our contribution to the bigger story of the world, leaving a piece of our “selves” in the minds and hearts of others (which Erikson labeled “generativity”).

We’re experiencing a crisis of meaning on many levels. In 2000, I helped to found the Legacy Project to mobilize the power of legacy for meaningful impact. We empower generations to connect with one another to bring meaning into life (and to improve well-being), while contributing to a positive collective legacy—all the little ways, every day, that we help to reshape a world that could be cruel or kind, competitive or collaborative, destructive or respectful.

Through the Legacy Project, older adults not only explore their own life stories, but also can address generational equity, because they have enjoyed both a mostly stable climate and growing econom-



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ic opportunity. Young and old work together to create a bigger “7-Generation story,” which means understanding thoughts and actions in the context of lifetimes across seven generations.

Multiple Generations Needed to Save the Future

The future is not the responsibility of the young. It can only be meaningfully created through the old helping the young. In February 2019, David Hogg, 19, a survivor of the Parkland school shooting and a gun control activist, pleaded on Twitter:

“Please, stop saying this generation will save the future. Every generation, every race, every nationality, every ethnicity, every religion, every zip-code, everyone must work together to save our future. Using love and education as our only weapon[s].”

We work with schools on Elders-in-Residence (legacyproject.org/you177/elders.html) to help form real, caring intergenerational relationships in communities. It’s not a “program,” but a way to weave neighborhood elders into the everyday social fabric of a school. Older adults of all abilities participate in classes with students, curl up on a couch to read with children in a “grandma room” or are partners in the computer lab.

In practical terms, many older adults can share valuable experience and expertise—life skills like how to cook, garden and even do home repairs, which will become tools of self-sufficiency in a world that will no longer be as predictable, as climate change accelerates.

We emphasize intergenerational listening. In our annual national Listen to a Life Story Contest, a young person interviews a grandparent or grandfriend and submits a short essay. Said one teacher, “Students today are behind screens so fre-

quently and this is an opportunity to actually sit with an older person and listen to a piece of their life.”

Students learn personal, meaningful life lessons—such as about historical atrocities we should never allow to be repeated, racial injustice, cultural roots and empathy. We have students as young as 8 years old, interviewing elders who are in their 100s. If we listen, we can change lives—including our own—and change communities.

Our world can be a 24/7 blur of superficial, disconnected, often meaningless activities.

Also, we challenge generations to team up for creative legacy projects. We provide a lot of guidance, like encouraging the young and old to talk about doing something that goes beyond the small time of our “McMoment” world—a 24/7 blur of superficial, disconnected, often meaningless activities. Legacy projects are the activities and ideas that mean something through the generations, and are focused on issues like the environment or inclusiveness. They are the building blocks of that bigger 7-Generation story.

As all generations work on creating a 7-Generation story, even older adults with cognitive impairment or dementia, like my mother, can help us to think bigger. The classic dementia test is to draw a clock. Mom can’t do that anymore. She’s free from the small time of a clock. She lives in the big time of sunrises and sunsets, heartbeats and hugs—the things that are truly meaningful. ■

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