

# CONSCIOUS AGING AND WORLDVIEW TRANSFORMATION

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*ABSTRACT:* For nearly two decades, a multi-disciplinary team of researchers has conducted qualitative and quantitative studies on positive worldview transformation. This included a comparative study of 60 teachers from different transformative traditions as well as longitudinal studies of the psychological and social impact of transformative practices. From this work, a model of worldview transformation was formulated that identifies consciousness-based practices that can promote personal and social well-being. In this paper we apply the model of worldview transformation to conscious aging. We explore the ways that conscious inquiry can inform people's experiences of aging, their models of what happens when they die, and an understanding of the way these beliefs impact how they live. A curriculum is outlined that was designed out of the worldview transformation model to help expand awareness of conscious aging, promote individual and social well-being, and facilitate a supportive atmosphere for exploration and mutual discovery.

*Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.*

Mahatma Gandhi

We all have personal stories about our lives and our place in the world. As we grow and develop, these worldviews inform how we live, what gives us purpose, what we value, how we understand reality and our place in it.

Many factors shape people's worldview. These include biology, temperament, family upbringing, culture, and geography, among others (Schlitz, Vieten, & Miller, 2010).

The social and neuropsychological theories of development indicate that as people grow and interact with the world, they learn to categorize, discriminate, and generalize about what they see and feel (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 2002; Siegler & Alibali, 2005). A worldview combines beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, values, stereotypes, and ideas to construct complex conceptual frameworks

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that organize lived experience. Together these form a kind of scaffolding on which individuals can build a meaning system about their past, present, and future.

Worldviews profoundly impact individual and collective goals and desires. They shape what people know and how they know it, both consciously and unconsciously. Worldviews inform human behavior in relationships, serving to choreograph individual and social actions and reactions at all times. They shape fundamental habits of self-reflection, analysis of self and other, and the means by which people communicate. Worldviews impact the questions people ask, how they learn and grow, and ultimately how they make sense of their experiences.

For example, a person who holds the view that the world is an essentially unsafe place, filled with people who are out to lie to them or steal from them, will assume a fearful and suspicious stance toward everyday experiences—a hypervigilance that can cause stress and unhappiness. On the other hand, a view of the world that holds that there are indeed some unsafe places and people but in general most people are honest and helpful—that in fact only a small amount of attention need be directed toward self-protection—will result in more calm and peaceful everyday experiences and leave a surplus of energy to engage in more health-enhancing activities. This example is quite simple and does not take into account a range of possible environmental moderators, but in essence it illuminates that one's worldview defines his or her general experience of self and world, and influences all perceptions and resulting behaviors.

### TRANSFORMING WORLDVIEWS

Some facets of worldview are dynamic and changing. Others are more stable over time. Grounded in our values and beliefs, worldviews can become rigid and resistant to change. This is true even when people are presented with information that refutes their previous assumption (Cook-Greuter, 2000; Dunbar, 2008; Dunbar, Fugelsang, & Stein, 2007). On the other hand, people are also able to substantially shift their worldview through life experiences or intentional practices (Gardner, 2004; Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2008). When this transformation in worldview happens, new options can emerge, even within the same set of life conditions.

Such transformations in worldview can lead to a reorganization of one's conceptual maps. As noted by Schlitz, Vieten, and Miller (2010):

While psychological development and maturation most frequently are thought to involve the addition of knowledge and changes in *what* people know, transformation involves epistemological changes in *how* they know what they know. It is not only behavior that changes but also the motivational substrate from which that behavior arises. It is not only a change in what people do but also in who they understand themselves to be at an ontological level. (p. 20)

## CONSCIOUS AGING

Both life development and aging impact people's worldviews. People view aging in different ways. In a post-modern perspective, dominated by a materialist paradigm that links the person and the person's body in a fundamental unity, aging can be seen as a failure on the road to death (Valle & Mohs, 2004). However, in many other cultures, there is not such a firm line between personhood and embodiment. In various indigenous societies, for example, there is the belief that ancestors live on in a spirit realm that allows communication and engagement in an ongoing way. While aging comes with changes in life circumstances and physical capacities, it is celebrated in many cultures. And while death can be seen as a loss, it is not the end of the relationship between the living and the departed.

Another dominant perspective in the West is religious, which can provide a healthy framework for those who are aging to feel supported by a benevolent source, to look ahead to some experience of consciousness surviving bodily death, and to experience health benefits associated with spiritual/religious engagement (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Seeman, Dubin, & Seeman, 2003). The religious perspective can also have consequences such as negative spiritual coping or feeling punished or abandoned by God (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). It is also possible that those with a less materialist perspective may not pay as much attention to maintaining their physical health, ignoring the physical body in favor of caring for the soul.

The topic of aging is becoming more relevant as demographics shift and the aging population grows in size. The latest US Census Bureau brief on data from the 2010 Census shows that the number of seniors is increasing faster than younger populations, raising the nation's median age from 35.3 in 2000 to 37.2 in 2010 (Howden & Meyer, 2011). The number of people reaching the age of 65 has jumped from about 7.5 million in the 1930s to 34 million today. By 2012, the American population of people 50 years and older will reach 100 million. January 2011 witnessed the first of approximately 77 million baby boomers, born from 1946 through 1964, moving quickly to retirement age and, according to the UN Population Division, this trend is global, with one in five people expected to be 65 or older by 2035 (United Nations [www.un.org/esa/population](http://www.un.org/esa/population)).

In the light of these changing demographics, there is a growing movement to bring greater awareness to the process of aging and the potentials for growth and transformation that lie therein. A movement of *conscious aging* offers a new way of considering aging that moves past the industrial world's preoccupation with youth, toward an appreciation of the transformative potentials that come with aging. In this way, a new model of aging is called for that embraces the fullness of life and all its complexities. Grounded in transpersonal and humanistic psychology (Moody, 2003; Ram Dass, 2000), this movement recognizes human psychological and spiritual development as unfolding over the life span. Similar to the way that researchers have recently learned that neural plasticity and even neurogenesis continue well into old age

(Ehninger & Kempermann, 2008), a conscious-aging perspective holds that personal growth and development can occur from pre-birth to post-death.

Positive development as it related to conscious aging is linked to life satisfaction and informs attitudes and practices leading up to death and potentially beyond (Labouvie-Vief & Diehl, 2000). Moody (2003) emphasizes adaptation to age-related losses as characteristic of “successful” aging. This is in contrast to “conscious” aging which implies a more complex, intentional experience.

Tornstam (2005) defines transformations in elderhood as “gerotranscendence.” From this perspective, he argues that people become less self-focused and more selective in their choice of social and other activities. Solitude becomes more important, with a decreased interest in superficial social interaction, material things, and with a greater need for meditation or introspection. People in this construct of *gerotranscendence* report a reduction in the fear of death—with a deep appreciation of life and death. This can lead to broadmindedness and a sense of tolerance, as well as increased feelings of unity with the universe and a new view of time. Such shifts may support positive transformations in worldview.

It is the thesis of this essay that the worldviews people hold about aging, death, and what lies beyond profoundly influence how they experience their lives in both positive and negative ways. Participating in a curriculum that brings greater awareness to these worldviews holds the potential to transform them in ways that support growth and well-being.

Through a multiyear research program, researchers at the Institute of Noetic Sciences have identified a model of worldview transformation that can be applied to the issues of conscious aging. Through the application of this model, we explore the ways in which awareness can be brought to aging, dying, and beyond. We further identify practices that can help people reflect on their worldviews, beliefs, stereotypes, and assumptions about aging in ways that may enhance the transformative, rather than the traumatic, aspects of growing older.

## BACKGROUND

In 1997, a multidisciplinary team of researchers initiated a series of studies focused on the process of worldview transformation. The goal has been 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, our team investigated factors that facilitate the kind of worldview transformations that result in an increased sense of purpose, meaning, and prosocial behavior for the participants. Such work applies well to the challenges and opportunities facing seniors. This program of research included analysis of individual narratives of personal transformation, three focus groups with teachers of transformative processes, in-depth interviews

with sixty representatives of ancient and modern transformative traditions (Schlitz, et al., 2008), surveys of over 1500 people who had experienced their own transformations (Vieten, Cohen, Schlitz, & Estrada-Hollenbeck, 2011a), two longitudinal studies of participants involved in community-based transformative practice programs (Vieten, Cohen, Schlitz, Radin, & Estrada-Hollenbeck, 2011b), and a study on how engagement in transformative practices affects health and well-being. Through this research, we have identified a naturalistic model of worldview transformation (Vieten, Schlitz, & Amorok, 2009) that can be applied to conscious aging.

Focusing specifically on the role of aging in worldview transformation, our team has also collected more than fifty additional audio and video interviews with representatives of the world's religious traditions, cultural leaders from sites as diverse as the outback of Australia to the rainforest of Ecuador, and with scientists and health practitioners from multiple disciplines, as well as religious scholars and spiritual teachers. In short interviews and small focused discussion groups, we invited people to talk with us about their views of death, dying, and what lies beyond. Based on a thematic analysis, we have used these data to shape an educational program on conscious aging and worldview transformation through blended learning (e.g., residential workshops, tele-seminars, print materials, and social media).

### HOW DO WORLDVIEWS TRANSFORM?

A transformation in worldview begins long before most people are aware that anything is changing. Peak experiences, numinous or mystical moments, life transitions—all these primers, even if not directly experienced as transformative, lay the groundwork for what is to come. Even when people can point to a pivotal moment in their life, they can often identify, in retrospect, what might be termed *destabilizers*—a combination of factors that set the stage.

The result may be a specific episode, period of life, or series of experiences that culminate in an aha! moment (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001; White, 1994). Whether an encounter of stunning beauty or one of deep pain or loss, such as the death of a loved one or the diagnosis of a life-threatening disease, this aha! moment challenges people's previous assumptions, leading them to change the way they see the world. Attempts to fit the new experiences or realizations into their old perspective fail, often forcing their awareness to expand to make room for the new insight. Aging and the reflection on the inevitable nature of bodily decline and death offer just such opportunities to broaden and deepen our understanding of what gives us meaning and purpose in life.

For Lee Lipsenthal (2011), a physician and cancer patient who died shortly after we conducted our interview, there were various stages in the process of worldview transformation as it relates to living and dying. In his words:

Transformational processes happen to us through life. Anybody looking in the mirror today will see that they aren't the same person they were ten years

ago: they've transformed. So, transformation is a lifelong process. Whether death is an ultimate lifelong process or an ultimate transformative process, I don't know ... There's a constant death and rebirth of this life as an individual; there's a constant change. For me personally, how you age and die is much more important than if you die.

Jean Watson (2011), a nurse educator who has worked with the aging and dying, described the value of an expanded worldview that sees life and death as part of the pattern of our evolution:

We need an expanded cosmology that allows us to embrace the physical, the nonphysical, the infinity or the sacred circle of life and all of nature. I think part of our evolution is to find that expanded image and vision of possibilities that embrace the unknown, that embrace the mystery, that invite it into our evolution. Maybe we've evolved as much as we're going to evolve biologically and the next real evolution of human kind is the evolution of human consciousness.

Of course, the transformative moment that leads to such insight can result in redoubled efforts to protect against further destabilization. It can also inspire an entirely new worldview that is capable of giving meaning to what happened. In this case, it can move people to the discovery of a set of practices that helps them to integrate new insights as the transformative path unfolds.

In our interview with religious scholar Ed Bastian (2011), he described the importance of practices that engage our awareness of and self-reflection on aging and dying:

Contemplating death has a way of helping us prioritize what's most important in our life and what this precious life is really good for, what it's meant for. And contemplating death helps you to prioritize and to simply let the false self, the false ego, the expectations that others had for you, the expectations you had for yourself, fall away.

It's the kind of thing you need to prepare for. It's a lifetime of preparation, of living fully, of engaging in the deepest questions of meaning and purpose in life. And it's a lifetime of preparing your consciousness and your state of being so that it's ready to live consciously through your death and see it as the most exciting opportunity we have. The great transition. The great adventure. The great end game.

### **Practices for Conscious Aging and Worldview Transformation**

How can people change worldviews to ones that are life enhancing during aging? The first step is to bring attention to what one's worldview is. Worldviews most often function at an implicit level, under the surface of conscious awareness. Through inquiry and self-examination, people can

become aware of worldviews that either limit or enhance their daily experience of life.

Often, for those who are aging, simple awareness of worldview is not enough to make positive shifts in perspective that enhance everyday life. One must also engage in intentional practices to support a positive transformation in worldview. Transformative practices can take many forms. In our series of studies, we found that meditation was far and away the most highly recommended practice for development and well-being. Having said this, rather than recommending specific practices, we have identified a number of essential ingredients of practices that support positive worldview transformation as one ages. When brought to almost any activity, whether explicitly personal growth-oriented or not, these ingredients make day to day activities, such as gardening, journaling, golf, or book clubs, pathways toward positive transformation.

### **Attention**

The first and perhaps most essential ingredient is bringing *attention* toward greater self-awareness. Here there is the emphasis on self-reflection and the appreciation of the noetic (inner) aspects of human experience. In conscious aging, there is the opportunity to pause and turn inward. It is a time when people ask themselves the deepest questions.

Conscious aging involves a greater understanding of changes in our identity. Rudolph Tanzi, a Harvard physician and expert on Alzheimer's, expressed his view that it is important to cultivate self-awareness and the development of self-observation. In his words:

Identity is self-awareness. You're aware of the fact that you're observing. You become aware of the watcher. You're taking in sensory information, but rather than just doing that as an automaton, you're aware of the fact that you're someone taking in sensory information. You look in the mirror and you say, oh, that's me ... It's a whole other level of consciousness, where you are aware of being aware; you become the watcher of yourself. And this is where great things can happen, because this is where you can really tap into all of the jewels and prizes there are in the whole web of consciousness in the universe (Tanzi, 2011).

Tools that help to shift attention include meditation, contemplative prayer, journal writing, walks in nature, gardening with mindfulness, and somatic subtle-energy body practices. In each case, one clears space from the popular media, the many weapons of mass distraction, to be with one's own consciousness in life-affirming ways. For example, one of the common challenges expressed by residents of The Redwoods Senior Center in Mill Valley, California, where IONS is conducting Conscious Aging workshops, is the frustration and loss of self-esteem around the need to move slower and in becoming more forgetful and clumsy at times. Taking time to reflect on one's



critical self-talk when these things happen allows one to bring the inner critic into more conscious awareness and then to reframe these internal messages as more positive and self-compassionate messages.

### **Intention**

A second element of transformative practice that applies to conscious aging involves cultivating *intention*. One can create intentions for a specific activity, an event, or for aging over time. One can inquire: “What matters most? What values do I want to adhere to?” Based on these reflections, one can craft an intentionality statement for their elder years so that when challenges and opportunities arise one will have developed an inner compass with which to navigate and make more conscious life choices.

Some may wish to engage in a life review, noting major moments of transformation that have led them to who they are and what gives them meaning (Schlitz, et al., 2008). The exploration of one’s personal narrative through writing will help clarify the meaning and purpose of one’s life as well as reveal its underlying spiritual dimensions. As the maxim attributed to philosopher Soren Kierkegaard suggests, “*Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward.*”

Clinical psychologist Rick Hanson notes that when we reflect on our lives, we can see them as an opportunity to experience the fullness of who we are. In his words, “If you know the movie is going to come to an end, it really motivates you to make it as good a movie as possible and to enjoy it as much as you can” (Hanson, 2011).

### **Repetition**

Another aspect of worldview transformation practice involves the *repetition* of new behaviors and the building of new habits. Learning to live with awareness and intention, compassion and forgiveness, leads to new ways of being. Just like efforts to build up a new muscle group require repeated exercise, so too does the process of conscious aging. Neuroscience offers us hope that such new habits are possible as we lay down new neural pathways that can help us to see the world and ourselves in new ways.

### **Guidance**

Finding sources of inspiration and guidance can help people to live into conscious aging. One can find guidance to understand the nature of change, both from outside and from turning inward. A skilled teacher, a study group, a social network that supports the explorations that are arising can all be helpful. As Mingtong Gu (2011), a qi gong master, expressed to us in an interview, “Life is about change, and so embracing change in all its expressions gives us



the opportunity to learn to listen and learn about how impermanence underlies all life.”

### **Integrating Practice into Everyday Life**

People often think of transformative or spiritual practices in relationship to certain places or times of the season. In the move to conscious aging, life itself becomes the primary practice—whether or not a formal practice remains a part of the process. Aging offers a time for increasing self-understanding. As Moody (2003) pointed out, however, to see this opportunity requires the ability to see these possibilities and to find a community of mutual support and encouragement that helps in the emerging new insights and practices. Finding sources of social support, whether in virtual or proximal social settings, offers a way of living into new patterns and behaviors, everyday and always.

### **Moving from I to We**

While aging is a personal process, conscious aging sees the shift as more than a personal quest—all about personal achievement or some outcome for personal benefit—to a process move from *I* to *we* (Vieten, Amorok, & Schlitz, 2006). In other words, the conscious aging practice infuses one’s life, as many people report the wish for and actively work toward the transformation of their community. Altruism and compassion born of shared destiny rather than duty or obligation can emerge here.

Bill Plotkin, Ph.D., describes the development task of elders as having at least five components: (a) defending and nurturing the innocence and wonder of children, (b) mentoring and initiating adolescents, (c) mentoring adults in their soul work, (d) guiding the evolution or transformation of the culture, and (e) maintaining the balance between human culture and the greater Earth community. In doing these things, elders embrace and engender wholeness (Plotkin, 2008).

As people move from equanimity and self-compassion in the face of life’s challenges to a daily sense of wonder and awe, even the most mundane aspects of life become sacred in their own way. Living deeply makes personal transformation contagious. As people share their experiences and their presence of being with others, a collective transformation that is more than the sum of its parts can emerge. Individual transformations combine to create collective transformation, which in turn stimulates more individual transformations and so on, in an ever-widening expansion of our human potential.

At the same time, people can become so immersed in a sense of oneness and shared responsibility that they lose sight of the complementary movement from *we* to *me*. The results of this can range from a cult mentality to becoming so fatigued by helping others that people forget to care for themselves. Caretakers for the sick or elderly can have compassion fatigue. Equally as important as

serving one's family or community is discovering how best to channel one's unique combination of talents, resources, experiences, and skills in a way that serves one's well-being.

### **Living Deeply**

Once the dance between self-actualization and self-transcendence, formal and informal practice, and receiving and giving come more naturally, people report an experience of "living deeply." As people grow older, they can bring greater awareness to the transformative process that allows a deeper experience of their life journey. Conscious aging offers the opportunity to look at relationships—to heal, forgive, and experience compassion for self and others. Living deeply is about growing in wisdom.

### **Death and Beyond?**

Contemplating death is a vital aspect of conscious aging. Although it is an area surrounded in fear, it is an inevitable part of transformation. Holding a cosmology of death helps to create a frame in which to hold our mortality. For scientist Rick Hanson (2011), death is part of evolution. In his words:

I think every organism knows how to die—whether it's a deer that just relaxes in the mouth of a lion or the rock climber who relaxed and opened to his death once he surrendered to it. I think about the ways in which the death of creatures—plants, animals, microbes, and certainly humans—is actually important from an evolutionary standpoint because it clears the way for the young to come forward and it enables a species itself to adapt and improve itself over time.

An important part of positive transformations in worldview involves reflection on one's own cosmology of what happens after we die. There are many maps or worldviews on this question, revealing a wide range of viewpoints. In considering them, people can find comfort and a set of possibilities for their understanding. Philosopher and physician Deepak Chopra (2011) explained his worldview when he considered the question of what happens when we die:

You actualize through the brain and body ... You're the user of your brain and your body. Of course, every time you have a mental event, there's a neural representation of that. You can see where it's happening as a spark of electrochemical activity. But your memories are not in your brain. They are actualized in your brain. And neither are your desires, imagination, intentions ... anything that makes us human—insight, intuition, memory, inspiration. These are qualities of our soul, and the soul is not in space-time. Now, in order for this to be meaningful, it can't be a theory. It has to be a realization, it has to be an experience, and that's what all spiritual discipline is about. Some people accidentally bump into their transcendent self through spiritual discipline ... If you do practice, you start to experience

that there is an inner being here, and it is not in the body. The body is in the inner being. Just like memory is in that inner being. When people ask: “Where do I go after I die,” the answer is: “There is no place to go; you are there now.”

### NEXT STEPS

In this article, we have considered how bringing conscious awareness to the aging process can support positive transformations in worldview that can enhance quality of life as one grows older. Aging invites changes in worldview as people go through developmental stages that connect to body, mind, society, and spirit. Bringing awareness to these processes can lead to enhanced personal and social experiences and behaviors. It can also lead to an expanded sense of self and the world. Based on a naturalistic model that was developed through a series of qualitative and quantitative studies on worldview transformation, we explored the ways in which conscious awareness can inform our experiences of aging. This leads us to emerging new directions for our program, which include the development of a curriculum on conscious aging as well as participation in the public dialogue about aging and transformation.

### CONSCIOUS AGING AND WORLDVIEW TRANSFORMATION CURRICULUM

As we apply the worldview transformation model to the issues of aging, we can see that there is a core competency or skill set that can be developed if people hold the intention to grow and develop. It involves the capacity to comprehend and communicate an understanding that information about the world around us is perceived and delivered through the filters of our personal and cultural worldviews. It is the understanding that beliefs about aging, dying, and beyond are embedded within individual and collective frames of reference and that other people hold different worldviews. It is knowing that our worldviews or models of reality are largely unconscious and that jointly engaging in practices that raise our awareness of the beliefs and assumptions we hold can allow us to better navigate encounters that inform the aging process.

To help people develop the self-awareness and self-management skills around conscious aging and the social-awareness and interpersonal skills needed to establish and maintain positive relationships, the research and education team of the Institute of Noetic Sciences has developed a blended-learning curriculum. In this process, our goal is to focus on the development of awareness about how who we are shapes what we know about the world and to encourage examination of knowledge-formation processes themselves.

As an experiential curriculum, the study of conscious aging and worldview transformation involves exploration of the pivotal role that worldview, perspective, or point of view plays in perception, understanding, and behavior. It utilizes elements that encourage self-reflection, personal

exploration, self-discovery, and collective learning experiences that encourage the cultivation of new ways of understanding self and others. Participants in the curriculum are encouraged to reflect and share their worldviews around aging while gaining tools for understanding the worldviews of others. The goal of the conscious aging curriculum is to apply the latest research and practices in consciousness studies and worldview transformation to the challenges and opportunities of aging. The format of our education programs is to use direct learning and guided self-reflection to help participants cultivate metacognition, including awareness of worldviews, cognitive flexibility, and a capacity to hold conflicting information, as well as social and emotional skills involving perspective taking, connectedness, and prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

Over the course of the lessons, the curriculum (a) introduces the concept of worldview, (b) helps participants understand how their perspective or point of view on aging influences what they perceive and therefore how they act and react, (c) provides experiences (such as optical illusions, paradoxical situations, and contact with differing perspectives) that are meant to increase cognitive flexibility and empower participants to examine their own assumptions, (d) uses different types of narrative to explore the way people make meaning and communicate their experiences about aging, and (e) brings increasing awareness to thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, particularly when presented with conflicting perspectives or points of view about aging, dying, and what may lie beyond. Sample questions for exploration include the following:

- Where do beliefs about aging and dying come from?
- Have your beliefs about aging changed over time?
- How can your beliefs limit your experience?
- How is it helpful to consider multiple perspectives?
- Why do people make stereotypes about aging?
- What does it mean to participate in a conscious community around aging?
- How do our relationships help us to see the world and ourselves in new ways?
- How can you connect more deeply to others?
- How can we reframe our critical self-talk, when we encounter challenges of aging such as clumsiness, slow motion, or forgetfulness, to more self-compassionate and forgiving messages?
- What were the triggers for worldview transformation in your life, and what lessons have you learned from them?
- What intentions do you want to manifest in your elder years?
- How does an evolving awareness about aging inform how we live our lives with greater self-compassion and inner guidance?
- How are you finding a larger purpose in life as an elder while also balancing a reduction in your obligations and limitations on your physical and mental capacities?
- What truly has heart and meaning for you? What matters most?

## CHANGING WORLDVIEWS ON AGING: THE NATIONAL AGENDA

As we further consider the implications of our research and its potential translation into education and communications, we have begun to participate more actively in the national conversation about conscious aging. We are using our model of worldview transformation, informed by the interviews and expert opinions, to help engage people in their own inquiry and to build communities of learning and exploration. We offer a series of teleseminars that highlight experts in the area of conscious aging and host the participants in community dialogues to help provide a context of encouragement and mutual support. As we engage with others in the conversation about conscious aging, the goal is to increase awareness about the benefits of aging, to reduce the fear that surrounds aging and dying, to facilitate communication, and to help foster a new way of holding the natural progress of life in all its rich complexity.

While early models of human development focused on child development and psychological maturity was considered to be largely complete by adulthood, modern theories recognize that we continue to develop throughout the lifespan. 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 continual growth and development during this fertile time. Each stage of life offers new fodder for transformation of worldview and consciousness. Our Conscious Aging Worldview curriculum applies the research, tools, and practices of consciousness studies to the issues of aging. As noted by authors Valle and Mohs (2004):

Life, death, and grief are everywhere, whether it is the birth of a new idea, heartbreak at the death of a child, or a leaf falling from a tree. In this way, we begin to accept and celebrate the constant flow of life's transitions rather than fearing the next turn in the road. Thus, to the extent that we can let go into the mystery of life, we find true peace and love in the aging process. (p. 194)

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## The Authors

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*Kathleen Erickson-Freeman*, IONS' Elder Education and Planned Giving Manager, has developed programs for the Donor Relations and Education teams for over ten years on. She currently works with IONS Visionary Circle members (those who wish to leave a legacy for IONS beyond their lifetimes) and conducts business development and outreach for the Worldview Literacy project, including inter-generation dialogues in collaboration with The World Café, global outreach with Cross Cultural Journeys, and other elder education programs related to conscious aging. Kathleen has a BA in Psychology and Masters-level study in Special Education from California State University, Hayward, a Teaching Credential from Mills College, and has completed two years of advanced study in the cross-cultural components of leadership and the



application of cultural wisdom traditions into contemporary life with Angeles Arrien. Before joining IONS Kathleen was marketing co-director at Interaction Associates, a global training and consulting organization that empowers people in organizations and communities to realize their most noble aspirations by training for and demonstrating the power of collaborative action.

**Personal Message from Marilyn Schlitz**

As I personally live into conscious aging, my worldview has been informed by the depth and insight of many great teachers. These include masters from different world traditions, healthcare practitioners, friends facing end of life, and researchers studying the transformative nature of death, dying, and beyond. For almost two decades, my team and I have conducted interviews, sponsored lectures, created educational programs, conducted research, and engaged the consciousness community in conversations on worldview transformation. In this process, we have been led to an ever-expanding appreciation for the aging process and a growing awareness about different ways of understanding death. We have also compiled a comparative archive on people's beliefs about what happens after they die, learning about different cosmologies people hold. Through these acts, including the writing of this essay, we have found ourselves moved by a great calling to help reduce the suffering that many people experience around death. We embrace our participation in the emerging movement on transpersonal gerontology; it is soul work for which we are most grateful.

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