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The Importance of Creativity in Old Age

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"I have two driving forces in my life -- to be creative and to be helpful. If I had to choose one, I would choose to be helpful."

[Bernie Kessler](#) -- a retired psychologist and an active, avid, very skilled photographer and photography teacher -- said this to me recently when we got together during his recovery from heart surgery and the infections and subsequent surgeries that nearly killed him after the original "successful" surgery. Bernie is 84. He knows he will not live forever. But he also said, "I am not depressed. I am grateful to be alive."

Creative and helpful! An important insight, it seems to me.

Of course, any pair of key components of living well is bound to be too simplistic; there's always more to it. But sometimes simplistic insights are illuminating. Freud, for example, identified love and work as the fundamental goals of human life. That rings true. But for those of us who are older, particularly for those of us who are aware that death is closing in, finding ways to shape and to express ourselves through artistic and other creative processes, and finding ways to pass on what we know to the generations of our children and our grandchildren, are increasingly important.

It is not that love and work become irrelevant to older people. They do not. But something happens as we become older that changes the nature of intimacy and changes our long-term ambitions. Love and work become a bit less central. Articulating ourselves and leaving a legacy become, or can become, as Bernie put it, our "driving forces."

Bernie, of course, is an unusual person. He is highly educated, financially successful enough to be able to live comfortably and married to a caring woman for 63 years. He has a daughter who shares his interest in photography and visits regularly, a network of friends who have been there for him during this very difficult time and connections with several arts organizations where he has exhibited and taught regularly. For him, being creative and being helpful are possible.

What about those who may not have creative talents, who may seem to have nothing to teach, who spent their lives doing jobs they hated, who barely have enough to live on, whose families are not intact, who have few friends or who are not connected with community organizations?

If their isolation is extreme, old age is likely to be terrible. But most people have something to contribute to their families and communities, and most people have interests they can cultivate. Yes, some people create and some appreciate, but appreciation of the excellence of others is an opportunity for expertise that is satisfying in itself and can be passed on. Knowing batting averages, the plots and characters of TV shows, which celebrities are doing what with whom, the results of political polls -- all of these are opportunities for personal development and to share knowledge. And virtually everyone is able to share their history, which is a great service to younger people smart enough to be interested.

The American society is wonderfully diverse, with a highly-developed sector of organizations that reflect the beliefs and interests of people from a multitude of backgrounds and life experience. Participation in these community groups, whether religious, cultural, recreational or political creates opportunities to cultivate new skills (including creative skills), to make a contribution and to leave a legacy. You don't have to be a Bernie Kessler -- a person of creative brilliance -- to find the satisfactions of creativity and helpfulness in old age.

But Bernie is instructive, because even in the aftermath of illnesses that nearly killed him and have left him visibly weakened, he has lifted his art to a new level. While I was visiting with him, he showed me photographs he is readying for a new show. It is called "[Silent Places](#)," and the photographs are simple black and white renditions of furniture in otherwise empty rooms. They are stark, without visual flamboyance, but filled with a sense of transcendent meaning that takes us beyond their visual surface. This work captures, I think, what the philosopher of art [Arthur Danto](#) has called "the transfiguration of the commonplace."

Bernie's new photographs are mature work that he probably could not have done when he was younger, despite the considerable beauty of the work he has produced over the years. I don't mean to suggest that young people cannot produce works of transcendent meaning. Obviously they can and do. I only mean to suggest there are new opportunities for creativity and self-definition in old age.

Bernie Kessler is just one illustration of the possibility of new discovery and of the cultivation of a meaningful legacy in the final stage of life.

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