

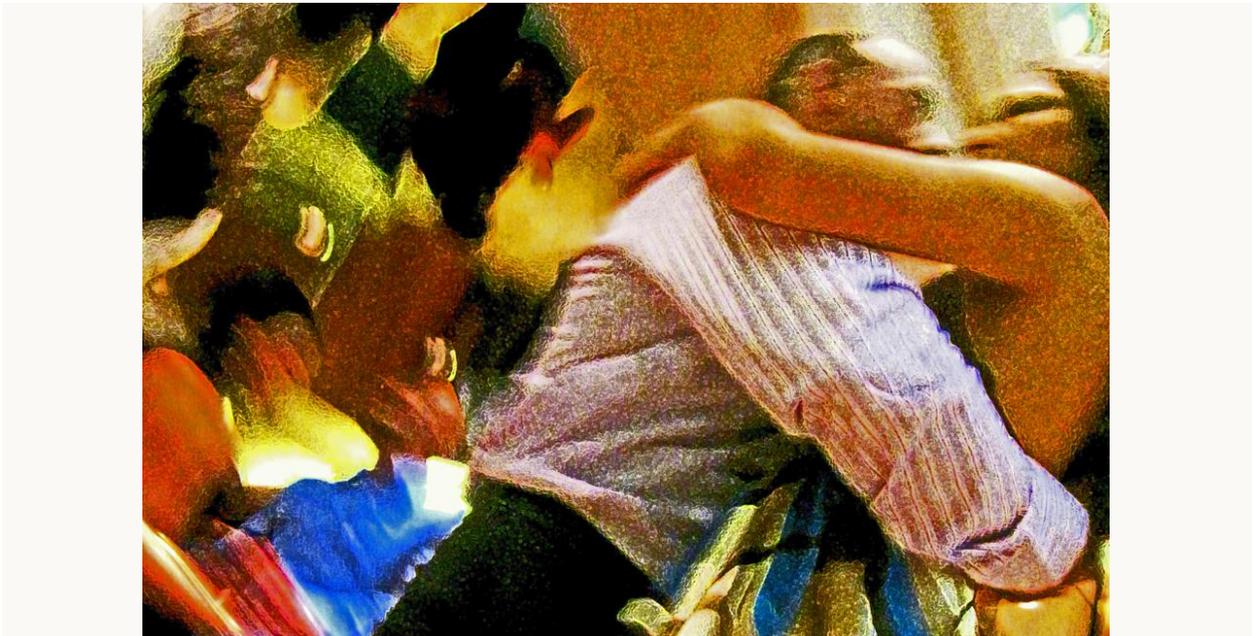
REALIZE MAGAZINE

Do Art

Columbia Professor Michael Friedman explains why Art matters as we age

[Michael B. Friedman](#)

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Are you wondering what you will do if and when you retire or no longer have time-consuming family responsibilities? Are you already retired and bored, lonely, or finding that time slips away without getting much accomplished? Are you feeling a loss of meaning in your life? Doing art—whether music, visual art, writing, acting, pottery, etc.—is a viable solution.

Obviously, it depends on your own interests. But if you are a person who was accomplished at one art form or another or a hobbyist who would like to go deeper, if you regret leaving an art form behind long ago and would like to get back to it or if you've ever just thought about giving it a try—engaging in a creative art may be for you. There's plenty of scientific evidence that creative activity can help people get the most out of their later years, and that has led to the development of a burgeoning field called "creative aging." The essence of it is pretty simple: creating art can be fun, engrossing, challenging, and emotionally helpful. It provides connections to others with shared

interests and to the roots of art in human history. It can help shape a new personal identity, provide an opening to a spiritual experience or offer up a whole new perspective on life.

There's also evidence that for many people creative capacities actually increase in old age, particularly for people who are experiencing a decline in cognitive capacities, which may in fact have created a barrier to creativity when they were younger. What can creativity do for you?

Immersion and Improvement

At the simplest level, engaging in creative expression can be so enjoyable that you become immersed in it, in the flow, losing track of time. It also creates an opportunity to work at improving your skills, which is a very important element of self-esteem for many people.

I myself have the great good fortune to have had two artistic hobbies for much of my life. I've played jazz piano for nearly 60 years, and I've done photography for over 30. In retirement, I've had more time for both of these art forms. I spend time almost every day playing the piano either for the fun of it, to prepare for public performances, or in the hopes of getting better. I spend even more time at the computer editing photographs to make them technically as good as possible and to create painterly digital images. Searching for new images really gets my creative juices going.



But what about people who never developed artistic skills when they were younger? I assure you, there is still time. I think, for example, of a friend who retired a few years ago and decided to paint—a really difficult skill to develop. She began with clumsy watercolors that were not much to look at, although she had a wonderful time doing them. She decided to work at it, take classes several times a week and now she paints for hours. Her oil paintings have become quite proficient. Not Rembrandt, of course,

though there are a couple of portraits in which she uses light like Vermeer's very effectively.

Whether it is in the field of music, writing, acting or a visual art, and no matter at what level, getting invested in a creative pursuit can engender a sense of accomplishment at a time in life when many people have left achievement at work behind them.

Connection

Being alone can be a major source of sadness for people who have retired, moved someplace with better weather, or lost important people in their lives to disability or death.

Again, doing art can help. On the most basic level it creates an opportunity to be with people who share common interests. I think of another friend who, when she retired, moved to a community where she had no social ties. She decided to take a painting class and soon met a new circle of friends, people who otherwise would have remained strangers.

At a deeper level doing art can provide a powerful shared connection with artistic cultures deeply rooted in human history.

When I play jazz in my combo, it feels magical. I have played a song called "Bags' Groove" with a friend who is a trumpet player several hundred times over the past 30 years. One of us counts by snapping his fingers or moving in time or saying numbers and then we are locked in unison. I am thrilled every time it happens.



Playing together is the essence of music. If you're lucky, there's an audience that also gets connected. There are remarkable moments of all being locked together in a collective excitement, a collective joy, a collective—well choose your own word. What forges connections between musicians, and between musicians and their audiences, is the shared experience of a culture they celebrate every time they play. There is a similar shared celebration of a culture and its history in doing any of the arts. This is certainly true in live theatre, where there is an audience, but it is also true in other art forms without others present at the moment of creation. Works of visual art are inspired by the painting and photography that the artists have seen and been moved

by. Writers are often inspired by great writers who came before them. Readers feel the connections.

We may be physically alone when we do our art, but we are nevertheless connected in in a cultural community and a history that is with us as we work.

Releasing and Managing Emotions and Memories

There is an important connection between creative activity and emotional life. This seems to work in two ways—to release emotions and memories and to get a handle on difficult emotions.

Creativity often involves reaching into yourself and discovering emotions that are new to consciousness, especially emotions that are not expressible in words or at least in ordinary prose. I find that sometimes when I play the piano feelings emerge that I can express only by using complex, close harmonies of the kind that I learned from Gerry Mulligan, Miles Davis, and Bill Evans. Via the driving rhythms of jazz, I often feel a release of a kind of raw emotional energy.

T.S. Eliot describes writing poetry in a similar way, as a struggle to put “undisciplined squads of emotions” into words.

Music is also a powerful force in evoking memories. Even people with advanced Alzheimer’s can often remember words to songs once the music begins to play. Some also recover long lost memories from the times of their lives when they first heard the music.

Creative pursuits can also be helpful in managing troubling emotions. I often find it difficult to sleep, especially when I am depressed or agitated, but if I go to keyboard in the middle of the night, put on head phones, and play my way through the painful feelings or at least distract myself from them until they quiet down, I find that I can sleep.

For me it’s playing music. For others it is painting or writing poetry or acting a part on stage that tames frenzied feelings and helps us articulate our emotions and possibly render them meaningful to others as well as ourselves.

Beauty and Transcendence

Art, at its best, is a quest for beauty. It is critical not to confuse the beauty of a lovely sunset or vista with the kind of beauty I am talking about. The beauty of good art is beyond pretty; it is beyond the sensuous surface of the work of art, beyond the image, beyond the sound, beyond the words. It is a kind of transcendence.

Arthur Danto, a wonderful philosopher and art critic, who died very recently, referred to it as the “transfiguration of the commonplace.” Art elevates the ordinary and gives it meaning. Danto thought that the meaning of art was derived from its social context, but I believe the meaning is far more complex. I think it is also found in the inner experience of the artist, in the process of creation, in the history and tradition from which it flows, and more. Meaning comes from the company of other artists—present, past,

and future. And it comes from the opportunity art provides to experience reality not in its ordinary banality but in its overtones of grandeur or in the deep decadence of which human beings are capable.

Art, at its very best, takes us beyond ourselves and beyond the day-to-day movement of time. At its best, time is suspended, and we are transported beyond the everyday to a dimension of experience that is more profound and more illuminating. This experience provides a sense of excitement, connection, discovery, meaning, and spirituality that is the heart of the most profound satisfaction of which human beings are capable.

Personal Identity

Many people find that retirement poses some of the same challenges of developing an identity that adolescence did. Once again, they have to figure out who they want to be when they grow up—or, more precisely, who they will be for the time they have left between now and death. Creative work can come into play in this process because art is not just the expression of a formed self or even the realization of a potential self; at its best it involves the creation of a freshly discovered self.

Playing jazz in adolescence contributed something important to who I became as an adult. Jazz and photography are increasingly part of the somewhat new identity I am developing as I age. Let me emphasize “am developing”. I am still in the process; my epitaph is not ready.

In a very important sense, creative art keeps the artist alive and growing even as they get closer and closer to the end of their lives. What more can you ask for in old age? (Michael B. Friedman is a retired social worker and social advocate. He continues to teach at Columbia University School of Social Work, writes frequently about aging and about mental health, leads a [jazz group](#) that performs regularly, and is a [photographer](#) and digital image maker who frequently exhibits his work in the NYC area.)

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