

ART AND WELL-BEING IN OLD AGE

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I don't like it when people say "Aging is not for sissies." It strikes me as ageist. But when I think about the health issues most of us face as we age, about the struggle to adjust to retirement, about mental changes that are not encouraging, and about the likely losses to come if we have long lives—I've got to admit that aging can be far from easy. Perhaps "not for sissies" is at least partially right.

That brings to mind a character named Sissy in a wonderful movie called *Quartet*. She has significant difficulty remembering what she is supposed to be doing and when and where she is supposed to be. Frequently, when she is in the wrong place at the wrong time, she damns her fading memory with a bit of a laugh and repeats, as in a refrain, "Aging is not for sissies".

She and the other major characters of the movie are retired professional musicians who live in a beautiful home which is only for musicians down on their luck in old age. All have their challenges. One man is still saddened and bitter that a woman he loved betrayed and left him. He has not been able to move on. Another man misses his sexual potency, though he claims that a little testosterone from time to time does the trick. Another character—a great star in her time—has lost the voice of her peak years and with it her earning power. She is humiliated to have to depend on the charity of others.

Quartet shows us some of what can make it tough to get old—money troubles, diminished physical and mental abilities, reduced independence, regrets and angers that don't disappear with time, hopes that persist despite their unreality, sorrow about the loss of people one cares about, deep disappointment about the loss of importance, and more.

But *Quartet* also shows us that life can be more than OK in old age when you can do what you love doing (even if you can no longer do it as well as you once did), when you can do this in concert with other people, when you can pass on your skills to the generation of your grandchildren, and when you have people in your life whom you care about and who care about you.

Quartet also makes very clear the power of music to make old age a time of well-being rather than a time of disappointment and despair.

Other creative arts can do this too, and today I will explore how doing art can help us to age well. (Let me note that appreciating art can also contribute to well-being, but that is not my topic for today.)

I want to be clear, however, that there are any number of paths to getting the most out of life in old age. Being a grandparent, civic activities, volunteer or paid work, religion, playing golf or bridge—all these and more can be the basis of a deeply satisfying life. Doing art is just one route to well-being in old age.

Whether creative art is for you is a totally subjective matter. But

- if you are a person who was (or is) accomplished at one art or another or
- if you are or were a hobbyist who would like to do more and/or get better at it or
- if you sadly left an art form behind long ago and would like to get back to it or
- if you think it might be fun—

engaging in a creative art may be for you.

It is important to add that creative art may also be for you if you are struggling with mental illness or even dementia, though that is a topic for another time.

What can creative art do for you?

There's plenty of scientific evidence that creative art can help people to get the most out of old age. There's even evidence that for many people creative capacities increase in old age, particularly for people who are experiencing a decline in cognitive capacities. Why? Because the cognitive capacities to be realistic and to suppress emotions, which are very important when we are adults, can block creativity.

But I don't intend to talk scientifically today. It's really not terribly complicated. At the simplest level, art can give you something enjoyable to do. If you want, art can also give you something to work at. It can be engrossing and challenging. It can also provide connections with people who share your interests and with whom you may enjoy spending time.

But there's more. Beyond those basic sources of satisfaction, art can help you discover and manage powerful emotions. It can connect you with a cultural community both in the present and in the flow of time. It can lead to an experience of beauty and transcendence. And it can help you form a new identity in old age.

Let me explain.

Immersion and Improvement

As I just said, at the simplest level, engaging in a creative art can give you something to do that you enjoy doing—enjoy so much, in fact, that you can immerse yourself in doing it even to the point of losing track of time.

And, if you want, you can also work at improving your skills and, over time, get the pleasure that comes with a sense of improvement and accomplishment. For example, I have the great good fortune to have had two artistic hobbies for much of my life. I have played jazz piano for nearly 60 years, and [I have done photography for over 30 years](#). In retirement, I have had more time for both of these art forms. I spend time almost every day playing the piano for the fun of it, to prepare for public performances, and in the hopes of getting better. Much of the time I don't experience a creative breakthrough, but when I do, it's a transcendent experience.

I also spend a great deal of time at the computer editing photographs to make them technically as good as possible and to create painterly digital images. This, too, can be laborious, but when I find new imagery it is, to say it again, transcendent. But I'm one of the lucky people with skills developed over many years. What about people who did not develop artistic skills when they were younger?

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. She takes classes several times a week and paints for hours. She now does oil paintings that are quite good. Not Rembrandt, of course, though there are a couple of portraits in which she uses light like Vermeer's very effectively.

But I must warn you that getting better takes a lot of work. In *Outliers*, a book about people who become the very best in their fields, Malcolm Gladwell maintains that it takes 10,000 hours to master a craft. I have no idea how he arrived at that number, but he's certainly right that it takes a lot of time. Recently, I met a concert cellist of some success, who obviously had put in his basic 10,000 hours. I asked him how long he practices now. "At least 6 hours a day," he said with a sigh. Much of it clearly is not fun.

In addition, if you want to be really good at art, you need to learn to ignore the people who tell you that you are terrific when you're not. Real self-criticism is essential to accomplishment. Accepting real criticism from people who know what they are talking about is part of getting better. That's one of the reasons that it is easier for children to learn a new skill than it is for adults. They take criticism for granted. We are inclined to think that it is rude.

Does this make doing art daunting for older people who are finished with hard work in their lives? Certainly for many it is. Fortunately, there's no reason to think that doing art is worth it only if you're really good at it. Just having fun and just having a creative opportunity can be enough to enhance the quality of our lives when we are old.

In the end doing art is not about being among the best. It is far more about the doing than about achievement.

Connection

As I am sure you know, being alone can be a major source of sadness for people who have retired, moved someplace for better weather, or lost important people in their lives to disability or death.

Doing art can help. At the most basic level it creates an opportunity to be with people with common interests. I think of a friend who, when she retired, moved to a community where she had no social ties. She decided to take a painting class, and there she met people she likes who otherwise would have remained strangers. Just going to class made her life better.

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

For example, when I play jazz with other people, 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. Sometimes it is more than just being in the same place at the same time. It is a unison of feeling and spirit that can be so intense that when it is over I sometimes think it would have been OK to die then.

The unity of spirit can extend beyond the players and include an audience. There are remarkable moments of all being locked together in a collective excitement, a collective joy, a collective—well choose your own word.

What makes connections between musicians, and between musicians and their audiences, possible is their shared experience of a culture that they celebrate every time they play or listen. Jung said it was a collective unconscious—a tempting idea in the context of collective improvisation. But for now I will say only that both in literally playing together and in shared love of the traditions of a musical culture, jazz musicians (and their audiences) find a profound connection.

There is a similar shared celebration of a history and culture in doing any of the arts. Certainly in live performance, where there is an audience; but even in the visual arts, 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 and viewers feel these connections.

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

Releasing and Managing Emotions and Memories

There is also 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.

Engaging in a creative activity 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, for example, 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](#). Sometimes a kind of raw emotional energy is released via the [driving rhythms of jazz](#).

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

Music also seems to evoke memories. Even people with advanced Alzheimer’s often can 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.

Engaging in creative activity can also help you to manage troubling emotions. Here’s a prosaic example. I often find it difficult to sleep, especially when I am depressed or agitated. Frequently, 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 are quiet enough so that I can sleep.

But there’s more than that. Think about the tempest of inarticulate emotions that resides constantly in our unconscious mind. Think about the tempestuous emotions that sometimes breakthrough into consciousness and are difficult to contain. These are emotions that art can master and shape into vibrant, powerful meaningful works that can even be shared with, and understood by, others. For me it’s playing music and creating digital images. For others it is painting or writing poetry or performing on stage that tames frenzied feelings and makes our artistic efforts articulate.

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. It is 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 a “transfiguration of the commonplace.” By this he meant that art elevates the ordinary and gives it meaning.

He thought that the meaning of art was derived from its social context. I think that the meaning of art is more complex. I think it is also in the inner experience of the artist, in the process of creation, in the community that shares in it, and in the history and tradition from which it flows. 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 joyously in its overtones of grandeur or tragically in the depraved depths of evil to which human beings can fall.

Art, at its very best, takes us beyond ourselves and beyond the day-to-day movement of time. Time is suspended, and we are transported beyond the everyday to a dimension of experience that is more profound and luminous. This experience provides a sense of excitement, connection, discovery, meaning, and spirituality that contributes mightily to the best that we humans can experience.

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. Doing art can help 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. In doing art you form yourself or at least some significant part of yourself.

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 of development; my epitaph is not ready to be written.

In a very important sense, doing art keeps artists alive and growing even as they get closer and closer to the end of their lives. And the spiritual dimension of art may help us reconcile with the fact of death and achieve peace. What more can you ask for in old age?