

Mount Holyoke College Class of 1964 *After the Middle Ages Comes the Renaissance!* Reunion 2014

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Lurline Purvis Aslanian, and F. Chaney Li, Organizers

Both Lurline and Chaney Li had to leave reunion after introducing the session. Their goals were that we share concerns, hear new perspectives, and take away possibilities for action as we leave campus. Jean Vnenchak volunteered to be the recorder and Libby Bradbury Pethick collaborated in summarizing the discussion for presentation to the full group on Sunday. Lurline provided a list of resources for the website.

Twenty to thirty classmates participated, and the discussions were wide-ranging, honest and heartfelt.

The discussions can be broadly categorized as covering:

- Wellness/Prevention.
- Connecton/Compassion/Caregiving. Critiques of our existing health care systems.
- Importance of end-of-life discussions.

Wellness/Prevention

There was general concern with the number of overweight students, faculty and alumnae that we saw on campus. If students don't start practicing good health habits now, when will they? Is any health and wellness instruction being done on campus? How are health and wellness promoted by on-campus food service?

We need to take control of our well-being by doing what we know we should be doing with diet, exercise, and mental and social stimulation and growth. If ill, we need to take control of our treatment and not be passive when dealing with health professionals.

If you are a runner, biker, walker etc., when you go out, carry identification, contact information for next of kin, and consider use of medical alert type bracelets in case of accidents or medical emergencies.

Exercise, meditate, and engage in art, music and learning a new language. All of these activities help to maintain and expand our neural connections. Our brains are plastic, and different parts of the brain can take over for injured parts.

Connection/Compassion/Caregiving

We are a sisterhood. As we learn of classmates who are ill, etc, call, send cards and letters, visit or send emails.

At Dartmouth, for example, there are classmates specifically designated in a compassion role to reach out to classmates who have special health issues.

If you are a caregiver, take care of yourself. Use support groups and friends. Listen to them and yourself to prevent major overloads. A classmate commented that in England caregivers can get paid respite care to provide them an opportunity to restore their energies.

Critiques of Our Existing Health Care Systems

Our health/insurance systems are complex and difficult and exhausting to navigate. Drugs are much more expensive in the US than in many countries where central agencies negotiate prices with drug companies.

Most countries ration health care - through doctors, through insurance companies, through costs, through philosophies such as "evidence-based medicine" and/or through the government directly.

We must learn to advocate for our health needs. If you or a loved one is ill, build a support system. Always go to health meetings with a friend. Do your research. Try to find a doctor(s) you can trust, who will work with you in making treatment decisions. And, with whom you can communicate as needed.

A number of examples were shared by classmates who did this for themselves or family members.

Importance of End-of-Life Discussions

Talk with your loved ones about what matters to them as far as procedures they want used if they become seriously ill or incapacitated so you will make the right decisions for them.

Likewise, talk with your children, spouses, etc. about your end-of-life wishes. Do your health care proxies, and advanced care directives.

<http://theconversationproject.org/> was recommended as a source of guidance for these discussions. It includes a fill in the blanks “Starter Kit” to help you articulate your desires. Elder care attorneys that are working exclusively for your interests can be helpful as you plan a whole variety of end-of-life decisions.

Post-discussions Actions Proposed

- Form a small group to ask the college administration what is being done on campus to teach and encourage healthy eating and exercise habits.
- Collect resources discussed and post on Website. Additional resources can be emailed to website64@mtholyoke.edu
- Practice compassion with classmates and others. This includes visits, cards, emails and checking in with family members and caregivers.

Summarized by Jean Vnenchak

RESOURCES PROVIDED BY LURLINE PURVIS ASLANIAN

RECOMMENDED WEBSITES

- People’s Pharmacy - Superb coverage of medical research and balanced reporting on home remedies. Listen to their podcasts or hear them on your local NPR station.
- Most of us are aware of the great medical clinics and hospital centers in our country. Thus, I did not list them. I included this site and the functional medicine one because they may not be that well known, and they are excellent resources.
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- The Conversation Project - Resource for end of life discussions with loved ones. Practical help.
- Death Cafe - The site states that their objective is “to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives.” Our local one has been very well received. There have been nine so far and attendance has multiplied since an article about it appeared in the newspaper.
- Environmental Working Group - Their information is supplied by US government agencies. It includes information on the most pesticide free crops and the worst pesticide contaminated crops as well as cosmetics, cleaning products and other things.
- Functional Medicine - The site says: “Functional Medicine addresses the underlying causes of disease, using a systems- oriented approach and engaging both patient and practitioner in a therapeutic partnership. ... Functional Medicine offers a powerful new operating system and clinical model for assessment, treatment, and prevention of chronic disease to replace the outdated and ineffective acute-care models carried forward from the 20th century.” This is a site where you may find a local certified holistic practitioner.

- Podamatic - This is up to date nutritional news from a nationally known, licensed nutritional practitioner who has two shows on public radio stations (wmnf.org and wslr.org).
- Caring - Help for dealing with dementia.
- After Talk - Online grief support.
- Heartache to Healing - Grief support.
- Consumer Reports - One of many helpful articles.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

- *Still Here, Embracing Aging, Changing, and Dying*, by Ram Dass. Probably the best book I have read on aging.
- *Handbook for Mortals: Guidance for People Facing Serious Illness*, by Joanne Lynn, Joan Harrold and Janice Lynch Schuster. This is the guidebook we mortals can all make use of for helping ourselves and others.
- *You Are the Placebo*, by Joe Dispenza was just published and immediately went to the NYT bestseller list. We may be more powerful than we think. Dispenza also wrote the excellent book, *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself*.
- *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, by Rachel Naomi Remen, is extremely inspirational. There are many stories of how people expanded their viewpoints to take a new and more helpful view of their physical and life challenges.
- *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, by Atul Gawande, MD. A physician's perspective on what needs to change in medicine for people to have more humane treatment as they age and die. Much very good info here and a must read for anyone who may have encounters with the medical system.
- *Who Dies*, by Stephen Levine. Anything else he has written is relevant and recommended.
- *Support for Alzheimer's and Dementia Caregivers: The Unsung Heroes*, by Judith L. London. Brief vignettes of typical sticky situations that come up in caregiving with people who have dementia. Really great, practical support here.
- *Graceful Passages, A Companion for Living and Dying*. A book and 2 CD set produced by Michael Stillwater and Gary Malkin. Anyone who has heard the wise words and music here has said, "thank you." Very beautiful and healing words from our sages and peaceful music.

RECOMMENDED FILMS

There are numerous excellent films, including:

"Death in Oregon" has a way of normalizing death. Very well done.

"The Conversation Project" Part 1 and Part 2, are thoughtful films designed to assist us with choices at the end of life. There is pertinent info here that you won't find anywhere else. These are available from the website listed above.