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Approaches to Aging: A Conversation with Nader Shabahangi

Aging Today is pleased to offer the first feature in our new series of ASA member profiles. In June, Barbara Downey, a member of ASA's FORSA governing council, spoke with Dr. Nader Shabahangi, president and CEO of AgeSong, about the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of older adults.

In 2006, the Bay Area-based AgeSong received the ASA Business & Aging Award (small business category). A family-operated group of eldercare homes that offers a non-institutional alternative to caring for older adults, Agesong's mission is to create therapeutic environments—places that support people in being who they truly are—and deliver an holistic approach to care by supporting their residents' social, emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing. For more information on AgeSong, visit www.agesong.com.

By **BARBARA DOWNEY**

I spoke with Nader Shabahangi earlier this summer, shortly after AgeSong's Academy's first community-based workshop in Oakland, California (see sidebar below). Featuring theologian Dr. Matthew Fox, this event was intended to help change attitudes about aging. We discussed a new approach to aging—one that emphasizes individualized and compassionate holistic care—and how the combination of eastern and western philosophies and practices support spirituality.

Aging is not a “disease” to be treated. The segregation of elders in our society has deprived us of one of the mainstays of its foundation—and we are the poorer for this. Dr. Shabahangi feels that issues of aging need to be addressed in community, which is a natural intergenerational platform for discussion and change. Attitudes toward aging can change, he says, when community members, both young and old, participate in an ongoing dialogue in which elders can explore their own wisdom and younger people can better understand the effects and transformations of aging.

NURTURING ELDERS

Dr. Shabahangi believes that we must nurture our elders for who they are, and embrace what he calls the “forgetfulness care model.” It is important to nurture a person where they are, because elders, especially those experiencing forgetfulness, are living in a different level of consciousness—a level that today's society labels as dementia. Forgetfulness is not a problem to be resolved. “There is nothing wrong with people who forget,” he says, “[living with] forgetfulness is like dancing between different worlds.”

Along with the stigma society attaches to dementia, or forgetfulness, is the fear people have of losing their mental faculties. Shabahangi suggests that one way to overcome this fear is to accept that a forgetful person is not lacking or lesser than any other individual. They are free from what he calls “the tyranny of the urgent” and the tasks and to-do lists that ensnare the rest of us.

Paradoxically, the less shackled we are to earthbound concerns, the more we are open to entering spiritual experience in a way that many of us aspire to, yet strain to attain. In working with elders who are forgetful, I have found that it is important to focus upon their transition from doing something to being present. What we do is only one facet of our being.

“We are so used to defining ourselves in terms of what we know, with the ‘I think, therefore I am’ Descartes approach. Accomplishment and autonomy define us. If we fail to live up to that definition, then we may perceive what society consistently tells us, that we are somehow diminished as a person,” says Shabahangi.

He maintains that, in the midst of forgetfulness, that “we are in essence the same person, but our capacity to achieve certain objectives no longer defines us.”

EAST MEETS WEST

Life and spirituality are not always defined in the context of either/or, but in the context of but/and. Perhaps this is why AgeSong adopts a combination of western and eastern philosophies and practices in its spiritual care for elders?

Dr. Shabahangi commented that as elders transition into another level of reality, getting in touch with essential feelings becomes the touchstone of effective communication. The gift of shared presence, comforting silence, holding hands or enjoying the splendor of a sunset together is a holy experience—one that might be considered a more mystical, eastern interpretation of spiritual connectivity.

AgeSong, however, offers equal space and place to their residents who desire the more western, ritualistic and linear spiritual experience of prayer or meditation specific to their own spiritual traditions. What is important, says Shabahangi, is that elders have access to whatever spiritual nourishment they need in order to connect to one another, as well as a higher power or spirit.

It is vitally important that families be aware that their elder members, even if they have dementia or forgetfulness, still seek emotional and spiritual connection. Sharing in the moment and entering into another’s perception of reality is what really matters. This, maintains Shaba-hangi, is the attitude that society needs to cultivate toward all of its aging adults.

A VISION OF UNDERSTANDING

Dr. Shabahangi continues to guide AgeSong’s mission, which is to increase the overall well-being of elders. “The vision never gets stale,” he says, adding that he feels blessed to be surrounded by people whose curiosity and passion for AgeSong’s work matches his own. He revealed that since he has become an uncle, he realizes that being part of an intergenerational family has sparked his creative processes about AgeSong’s intergenerational vision. “All generations need to appreciate the beauty of elders and learn to understand the importance of their expressions,” he says.

Means of communication for those experiencing dementia or forgetfulness may range from writing, making artwork and speaking in repetitive phrases, to walking and pacing, folding and unfolding items or making signs and gestures.

Dr. Shabahangi noted that AgeSong will continue to develop programs that focus upon “deepening the individual consciousness” of older persons in order to gain a better understanding of such expressions. These programs, he says, will train Agesong psychologists and interns in “existential, process-oriented therapy and validation therapy so that they can understand a person in each moment and in each state of consciousness.”

This truly is worthy work. For which one of us, after all, does not long to be understood in such a meaningful way? ❖

Barbara Downey, an ordained pastor, currently serves as lead chaplain with Hospice In-spiris, Phoenix, Ariz. An advocate and educator for her patients, Downey holds a special place in her heart for those with Alzheimer’s disease and dementia. She presents, teaches and shares about what she has learned from these very precious patients.