

“I’d rather die dancing.”

By Angie Loecke, Catholic Charities Psychologist, Austin, MN

It was New Year’s Day 1974. I was at St Rita’s Senior Center on South Broad St in Philadelphia. Outside, the Mummers’ Parade was streaming past with bands playing various renditions of “Oh Them Golden Slippers”.

One lady was in and out of the building. She would go out to dance enthusiastically and then return to warm up. I became a little concerned because I knew she had a heart condition and I encouraged her to sit for a while and take it easy. She responded by saying, “Honey, I am going to die soon enough, and I’d rather die dancing!”

I’ve thought of that lady many times throughout my career and have wondered if we place enough emphasis on the quality of life as we age. Today medical professionals work diligently to prolong life and financial advisors worry about the longevity of our retirement savings. Good health and financial security are important elements of our overall welfare but we also need a zest for living and a purpose for being.

One issue that impacts our zest for living is loneliness. Loneliness is a major issue for many, particularly as we grow older. Senator Ben Sasse (US Senator from Nebraska) ranked loneliness as the nation’s “number one health crisis”. Former Surgeon General Vivik Murthy stated, “During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness”.

In addition to feeling lonely, many people are embarrassed to admit that they are lonely. This only adds to their isolation. In today’s social media loneliness is often portrayed as if it were a personality defect. The reality, particularly for many of the elderly, is that loneliness just happens. Children grow up and leave or become increasingly busy with their own lives. Spouses and siblings and old friends die or become disabled. One’s own social activities may become limited due to physical disabilities. Making new friends and increasing social interaction is needed but this often does not happen without intentional effort.

Finding purpose or having a reason for being is another important aspect of life satisfaction. A 94-year old man living in a nursing home was referred to me because he repeatedly told staff that he wanted to die. When I talked with him, he stated simply that he had outlived his usefulness and he saw no reason that he should go on living. Having a sense of purpose is vital and what that purpose is changes throughout our lives. Many people find that retirement is an experience which causes them to rethink their purpose in life. And as people age beyond retirement there are further changes to our sense of purpose as we adapt to increased frailty.

Although aging can be a source of problems and frustrations it is also a time of unique opportunity. For many retirees there is a freedom to creatively pursue their passions. In recent years a positive aging movement has emerged which focuses not on the problems but rather on the possibilities of aging. A good source of information about positive aging is the *Human Values in Aging Newsletter* which can be found at <https://www.passiton.org>

As one navigates the challenges and opportunities of aging it is reassuring to know that there are many resources available.

The National Counsel on Aging offers a program called *Aging Mastery*. This program offers lots of practical advice and suggests ways that people can be proactive in addressing problems related to aging. Many senior centers offer this program and I would highly recommend it to anyone who is approaching retirement age.

Catholic Charities' Active Aging Program has several different programs which can provide support and assistance. Their Common Good RSVP program is an excellent resource for anyone wanting to be involved with volunteering. Volunteering can be a big help not only to the community but also for the individual who volunteers. The volunteer gains an increased sense of purpose and also has opportunities to become more active socially. Other initiatives within the Active Aging Program promote physical health as well as providing opportunities to increase social interaction and create new friendships.

Catholic Charities' Counseling Services offers therapy and counseling services for persons of all ages including those who are over age 65 and receiving Medicare. When problems related to aging cause one to feel depressed, stressed, or anxious it may be helpful to seek the assistance of professional mental health providers.

Information about the *Aging Mastery* Program, Catholic Charities' Active Aging Program and Catholic Charities' Counseling Services can be found at the Catholic Charities website: www.ccsomn.org or by calling 507-454-2270.