



a journal of positive futures

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YES! #35, Fall 2005 **Respecting Elders, Becoming Elders**

YES! Discussion Guides are designed to help you explore your own experiences, opinions, and commitments as they relate to material found in YES! magazine. Use them in group discussions, classrooms, or study circles. We believe that when people discuss with mutual respect and caring the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change.

You can find the articles mentioned below on our website at www.yesmagazine.org. You are welcome to download and photocopy them free of charge. If you'd like to purchase multiple copies of YES! or subscriptions for your class or group, please phone 800/937-4451 and ask for the Discussion Group Discount.

Ours is a youth-worshipping culture. We compliment people by saying they look much younger than their ages, we bleach and dye and nip and tuck to achieve the look of youth, and we prize the money-earning, achievement-producing independence of what we call “the prime of life”—the years between childhood and old age. Yet most of us will someday be old, someday likely be frail and dependent on the care of others. And throughout the industrialized world, the numbers and proportion of the aged are swelling, as birthrates decline and life expectancies rise.

Do these growing ranks of the elderly represent a problem or a possible solution? Do our elders represent an opportunity for our culture, even a chance to rescue it from some of its mistakes? What is old age good for?

This discussion guide centers on the following articles. You might want to discuss a different one at each session.

- William H. Thomas, “What Is Old Age For?”
- Robert Marshall, “Of, By, and For Seniors”
- Carolyn McConnell, “Where Will I Live?”
- Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, “Can Elders Save the World?”



What is old age for?

William Thomas argues that, far from being an evil, old age is humanity's greatest achievement. Elders help raise the next generation, hold a culture's wisdom and pass it to young people, and they resist what Thomas calls the "tyranny of adulthood." Those are some of the reasons elders are essential to a humane culture and even to our survival.

- What was your relationship with your grandparents or with other elders in your community as you grew up?
- If you have children, what does their relationship with grandparents or other elders give them? Do you wish for a different relationship with elders for yourself or your children?
- If you are a grandparent, what do you wish from your relationships with your grandchildren?
- If you are over 60, what word do you use to describe your stage in life? Do you regard yourself as an elder? Do you feel you are, in Thomas' words, a library to your community, a keeper of wisdom? Why or why not?

Of, by, and for seniors

Traditionally, the Japanese have cared for their elders within families. But now the shrinking birthrate, changing family structure, and growing numbers of the aged mean fewer elders are cared for by family, but more need care. In response, the Japanese have created a remarkable co-operative system to satisfy the needs of seniors by tapping into the capacities of seniors. Koreikyo provides its members with employment, care, an income, and a meaningful way to stay involved in the community.

- This response to the needs of seniors is very different from that of the American Association of Retired Persons, which lobbies for legislation, provides supplemental insurance and information, and publishes a magazine. What advantages and disadvantages does Koreikyo have over AARP?
- What needs do you have as you age that a co-operative might or might not satisfy? What do you, or elders you know of, have to offer to a larger community? Would you be interested in creating something similar to Koreikyo in your community? What aspect of Koreikyo's work might you start with?

Where will I live?

Most of us dread being warehoused in a nursing home. Yet our housing and care needs change as we age. A large multi-story single-family house with a big yard may seem ideal in our middle years, but not be a possible living arrangement as we get more frail.

- What housing options for the aged seem appealing to you, and which ones unappealing? What is it about particular housing options that are more or less appealing? Consider who you might like to live with, whether with other elders or with people of different generations, what sort of assistance you might want, how you would like to take care of your surroundings.
- Where would you want to live as your independence decreases?
- Where would you want to die?
- If you are a young(er) person, would you like to live with elders nearby or in your home? Why or why not?
- What are the obstacles to your preferred living arrangements as you get older? What might you do either personally or politically to make any of these options a possibility for you and for others?



Can elders save the world?

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi sees the phases of life through the metaphor of seasons, each of which has its appropriate work.

- Rabbi Shachter-Shalomi says there is a script for each stage of life except the last. Have you known what your script was for each phase of life? How do you see yourself spending the fall and winter of your life? What do you most fear about getting old?
- What would you need to do to enter elderhood? What could your community do to support you in making that transition?
- Do you have an older person you admire and would like to be like? What makes this person a model for you?
- What do you fear about dying? Have you witnessed people dying? Which seemed like better or worse deaths and what made them so? How would you like to die? Are you able to talk with family members about death, or, like Schachter-Shalomi with his father, is this difficult? What are the barriers?
- Wendy Lustbader in her article says that we fear frailty and dependence even more than death itself. Does this seem true to you? What would make frailty and dependence less painful to you? What could we do as a society to make frailty less dehumanizing?

What are you doing?

Are you using this discussion guide as part of a discussion group? In a classroom? Please let us know how you use it and how we can improve it by e-mailing us at DiscussionGuides@yesmagazine.org. We're also looking for stories of what you're doing to change the world for the better. E-mail stories of up to 500 words to: Editors@yesmagazine.org. You can download additional copies of this guide at www.yesmagazine.org.

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