

Embrace Curiosity

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In 2004, my professional mentor, Dr. Elmer Burack, mailed me the classic book by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, “From Aging to Sage-ing: A Revolutionary Approach to Growing Older.” Elmer encouraged me to become certified as a Sage-ing Leader through Sage-ing International. He believed that with people living longer, they were going to need some guidance and that could be my calling.

I took his advice, and for the past 15 years I have hosted a podcast called “Becoming a Sage,” in which I interview thought leaders about living one’s best life. I often summarize what I’ve learned in this way: Becoming a sage is not about being successful personally or having a lot of money. Yes, you have to have enough money to support your lifestyle, but becoming a sage is about making intentional decisions about how you spend your resources—time, energy and money. If I had to select two words to describe a sage, they would be curious and generous.

When sages are curious, they ask questions and are interested in others. They are committed to continuous learning and discovery. They’re generous with their resources and give back to the community. They want to make a difference by staying engaged and involved through boards and commissions, philanthropy and mentoring.

Recently, I attended WesleyLife’s 75th anniversary celebration. Dr. Laura Carstensen, the founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, was the keynote speaker. In 2018, the Stanford Center launched an initiative called “The New Map of Life” and released their report earlier this year. Carstensen shared 10 conclusions from the report, and the one that resonated most with me was this: Learn throughout life.

This may be common sense, but Carstensen pointed out that most of our formal education is front-loaded into the first two decades of our life. According to the report, “The New Map of Life envisions new options for learning outside the confines of formal education, with people of all ages able to acquire the knowledge they need at each stage of their lives, and to access it in ways that fit their needs, interests, abilities, schedules and budgets.”

One silver lining of the pandemic has been the explosion of online learning opportunities, some of which were not possible before and often were unaffordable or inconvenient. For years, I have been a fan of author and writing instructor Natalie Goldberg, and I dreamed about taking a writing course with her in New Mexico. When I learned she was offering an online course for the first time, I jumped at the opportunity. So did 1,200 other people from around the world.

If we are going to have a long life, then let's spend it learning. Reading and listening to podcasts is another way to continuously learn. If you want to learn more about becoming a sage, turn to Arthur Brooks. He writes a column for The Atlantic called "How to Build a Life." In addition, Brooks has a podcast titled "The Art of Happiness," where he weaves together the art and science of living a better life.

Decide what you want to learn; there are resources to help you learn it. And then think about how you can share what you are learning with others. At 95, my dad learned how to navigate his iPad from a resident at Scottish Rite Park who offered a free class. It was a win for everyone involved.

In his book "From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life," Brooks writes: "Devote the back half of your life to serving others with your wisdom. Get old sharing the things you believe are most important. Excellence is always its own reward, and this is how you can be most excellent as you age."

Jann E. Freed, Ph.D., is the author of "Leading With Wisdom: Sage Advice from 100 Experts." She also hosts the podcast "Becoming a Sage."