As we age, what happens to the aging?
By Al Gini
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Having survived yet another year and having just recently celebrated my birthday, I’ve been thinking a lot about age and aging.

As a society we are getting older and living longer: In 1850 the average age was 43; in 1900 it was 47; in 2011 it was 78; and according to one United Nations report, in 2300, citizens of developed nations can expect to live until they are 101!

The number of people living to an advanced age is also steadily on the rise. Just over 13% of the U.S. population is 65 years and older, and the fastest growing age group are those individuals who are 85 years and up. They represent 1.8% of the population or 5,493,433 individuals. Within this category, fully 79,000 of these individuals are centenarians.

Assuming that modern technology and medicine will allow most of us to live a relatively vigorous and vital life, the real question we must face as a society is: What do we do with this new gift of life? Can we create meaningful work for this growing demographic? Can we offer them tasks and diversions that are not demeaning and empty handed? Will we, as a society, be able to treat them with dignity and respect? Or will we look at our growing number of aging elders, at best, as a sentimental ornament of past times; or, at worst, as a useless burden and an unwanted responsibility?

From a personal point of view, I’m hoping the psychologist Abraham Maslow was right when he said that “wisdom was the accumulation of knowledge and experience, and then living long enough to reflect on it, make sense of it, and apply it to oneself and others.” I’m hoping that with age comes a certain perspective which will allow me to:

- Learn the lessons but walk away from the pain
- See beyond unimportant parochial particulars
- Let go of some of self-serving egoism
- Transcend pointless power struggles
- No longer fear failure
- No longer worry about careers, status or success
- Be open to the reality of change
- Be unthreatened by the needs of others

As a society we need to address the growing problem of age and aging. According to gerontologist Seymour Littallek, “a society that does not provide sufficient gratifications for the elderly will be an unhappy society for the young as well as the old. If the old are not gratified, nobody can accept the
prospects of age with equanimity...for any society which cannot treat its elderly members decently is doomed to unremitting despair and chaos.”

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