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Awaken the Sleeping Giant

By

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Eric Hoffer, the working class philosopher, wrote in *Reflections on the Human Condition* that “The hardest arithmetic to master is that which enables us to count our blessings.”

In the face of the current economic straits, the tendency is to think gloom, doom, and cuts. Indeed, cut as a noun and as a verb is all around us. But let’s ask ourselves if there is a way to make more of what we have in place while we work to recover. Is there an untapped resource that can be activated, opened up, and released? If so, what is it and what is the key?

To my mind, the answer is: older Virginians. They (we) are the untapped resource. Recognition and reinforcement are the keys in unlocking the wealth. Only I’m not talking about financial wealth. Let me explain. Years ago in my previous position our office was working with a senior center on the rural Eastern Shore of Maryland that was struggling to get older adults to its on-site programs. They agonized over their lack of a bus. When they redefined their problem from lack of a “bus” to lack of “transportation,” numerous opportunities opened up, including systematic car pooling and jitney taxis. Energized by the subsequent, creatively produced attendance of their older adults, the center even arranged some use of idle school buses in the middle of the school day. The point is that the resources were there all along but couldn’t be seen because of the traditional focus on buses. So it is, to some degree, with the current budget shortfall.

Historically, we in the so-called Aging Network of service providers, administrators, educators, and researchers have seen older adults as the end not the means, to mix mathematics and philosophy. We have rationalized our programs, understandably, on the needs of the older adults we have served. Carroll Estes called this *The Aging Enterprise* in her celebrated book of the same title some 30 years ago, noting that an entire system has developed around ameliorating the problems of elders in need. While the work to address needs among older adults (e.g., isolation, exploitation) continues and must continue, the process may be made more effective by recognizing and reinforcing other older adults who are not in need, those who have talents and skills they might bring to the problems. Indeed, some who receive services also have significant gifts that they are sharing or could. In other words, let’s think about older Virginians as providers and as means, not only as recipients and as ends.

This resource is wide and deep. Psychologically, economically, socially, biologically, people grow more individualized, less like their age-mates with added years. It is the thrust of human development. Older adults in the composite have accumulated amazingly different sets of skills, connections, spheres of influence, finances, facts, and knowledge, to name just a few differentiating characteristics. Admittedly, in this digital age, we must

confess the impermanence or brief shelf-life of “knowledge.” Even so, what are we doing with these arrays of experience and talent?

I am not leading up to some grand invocation of volunteerism. Research has shown for decades that about the same small percentage of us acts on volunteering impulses at any age; it tends not to rise just because one gets older. Rather, I am trying to call attention to the latent pool of consultants, trainers, teachers, go-betweens and more that exists among older Virginians that could be brought to bear on the diverse problems vexing an Aging Network now that funds are in even shorter supply.

Think of what is all around. Many older adults see education as lifelong learning and opportunity for personal growth, not merely as something completed early in life. Every state in the country now has some form of reduced tuition program in higher education for its older citizens. Adult education and lifelong learning institutes are spreading. How are we in the Aging Network connecting with these pools of growing minds? Do we collaborate with higher education and lifelong learning centers in mutual training or problem-solving? Do we visit these schools and centers to explain who we are and what goals we seek? Do we informally or formally invite them to be part of the solution?

Older adults are also the unpaid foundation of long-term care, providing more hours of chronic care than the sum of our formalized health and institutional systems. If these family caregivers were to go on strike tomorrow, the fabric of our state and national budgets would tear, costing taxpayers billions more for care to fellow citizens at risk. So how do we recognize and reinforce these pillars of chronic care? The most modest investments in our Area Agencies on Aging would enable our training family caregivers in such topics as correct lifting, nutrition, basics of medication management, and self-health. With this training they could continue doing what they want most, *to be left alone*. The modest investment might be monetary and it might be identifying relevant expertise among other older adults in the community and deploying it.

Variability among older adults increases with time. For each of us there is a personal profile of what we consider "meaningful activities." For some of us time not filled with activities is a waste. For others, time so filled would be oppressive. Our research some time ago, focused on mid-life and older adults, showed that the greater the number of meaningful activities a person engages in, the greater is his/her life satisfaction. It was better for one's self-perceived life satisfaction to engage in, say, five activities for three hours each than to invest in two activities at seven and a half hours each. Apparently breadth of activity correlates with a fuller sense of satisfaction with life. In other words, can we offer the opportunity for meaningful activities to older adults in our communities, thereby benefiting both them and us?

It seems to me that, in order to maintain our commitment to quality, we in the Aging Network need to invest in the future despite the monetary problems of the present. In Virginia, older Virginians are a remarkable resource for our future.