

## What is Creativity?

## Introductory Reading

*Be brave enough to live creatively.  
The creative is the place where no one else has  
ever been.*

- Actor Alan Alda

Dr. Gene Cohen, director of the George Washington University Center on Aging, is perhaps the world's foremost expert on creativity and aging. He oversaw a pioneering study on creativity and aging and wrote two seminal works on the subject, *The Creative Age: The Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life* and *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*. Cohen defines creativity as "the process of bringing something new into existence, available everywhere" (Cohen, 2005, p. 169). This definition suggests that the capacity for creative discovery is available to all of us, irrespective of age, if only we seize the opportunity.

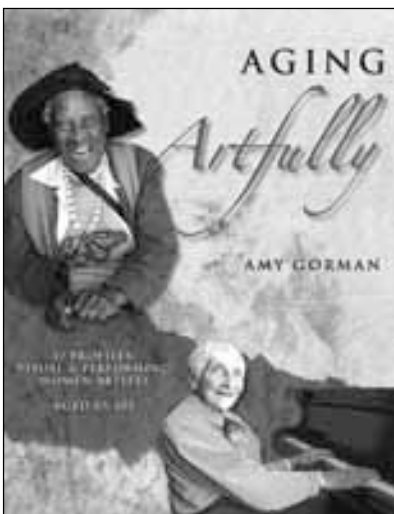
Cohen's research demonstrates that creativity is an essential component to living well as one ages. He uses psychologist Howard Gardner's concept of "Big C and Little C" creativity to further explain the meaning and practice of creativity. Big C creativity applies to the

extraordinary accomplishments of great artists, scientists and inventors. Possessors of Big C creativity that appear in this curriculum include nonviolent activist Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, composer Duke Ellington, artist Tasha Tudor, and potter Margaret Tafoya.

Little C creativity applies to the "diversity of everyday activities and accomplishments" by "ordinary" people who may never become famous but are nonetheless extremely creative in their pursuits (Cohen, 2005, p. 169). Possessors of Little C creativity that appear in this curriculum include activist Ruth Ellis, surfer and catamaran designer Woody Brown, African fife player Otha Turner, and the members of the Young at Heart chorus.

Psychologist Erik Erikson, in his book *Vital Involvement in Old Age*, argued that many people mistakenly believe that they have no inherent creative ability. He suggested that such a misconception comes from cultural conditioning coupled with an educational system in which arts education is often given minor importance. Erikson believed that in fact creative artistic expressions should be seen as "a welcome source of vital involvement and exhilaration," especially in later life (Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick, 1986, p. 318).

While many people assume that creativity is about *making* something new, Dr. John Krout, director of the Ithaca College Gerontology Institute, reminds us that "Creativity is a very broad concept and can include *learning* new things as well as *doing* new things" (Krout, personal communication, May 24, 2009).



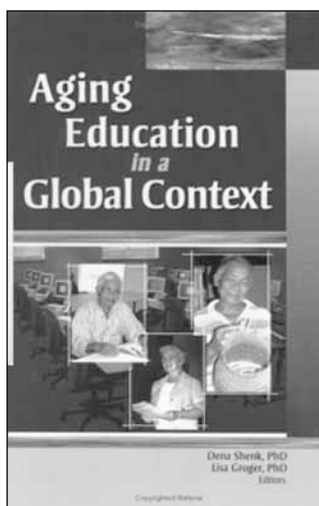
**What messages about creativity and aging does this book cover communicate?**

## Creativity Supports Healthy Aging

We have all heard stories of famous people who have exercised creativity well into later life. Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals at the age of 78. Michelangelo sculpted at 89. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote law on the Supreme Court at 90. Martha Graham choreographed new work at 96. And Grandma Moses still painted when she was 100. Krout noted the 21<sup>st</sup> century research that affirms the Little C benefits behind the stories of these Big C exemplars:

Many people don't realize how important creative pursuits are to their well-being, especially as they age. While a relatively new area of research, we are finding an increasing number of studies that demonstrate the power of creative activities as an outlet that increases health and well-being among a range of older populations.  
(personal communication, May 24, 2009)

These recent studies include Cohen's 2006 study of 300 people ages 65 to 103, half of whom participated in community arts programs and half of whom did not. He found that the



**What do the title and cover design tell you about the target audience for this book?**

arts program participants experienced better physical health, had fewer falls and scored better on loneliness and depression measures (Cohen et al., 2006).

Cohen's study was the first to employ an experimental design with a control group to confirm results. Since Cohen's research other researchers have arrived at similar conclusions in their studies of creative elder populations. In 2007 researchers Joan Jeffri and Doug Heckathorn released the results of a study of more than 200 visual artists aged 62-97, most of whom "demonstrated personal growth, creativity, self-efficacy, autonomy, independence, effective coping strategies...and also maintained extensive social networks" (cited in National Center for Creative Aging, 2009). Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi interviewed people in their seventies who had been highly creative in their youth. He concluded "often their interest had broadened to include larger issues; politics, human welfare, the environment, and occasionally transcendental concerns with the future of the universe" (cited in Vaillant, 2002, p. 240).

These studies have sown a harvest of initiatives to support creativity and aging. In 2001 the National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA) was founded to foster an understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and healthy aging and to develop programs that build on this understanding. In 2005 the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) sponsored a Mini-Conference on Creativity and Aging, which was followed in 2008 with a grant initiative entitled "Creativity and Aging in America." The Gerontological Society of America, the National Council on Aging, and the American Society on Aging have all recently offered articles, webinars and speakers on topics related to creativity and aging.

## Depicting Creative Elders in Film

*There is a fountain of youth; it is your mind, your talents, the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of the people you love. When you will learn to tap this source, you will have truly defeated age.*

- Actress Sophia Loren

*No matter how old you get, if you can keep the desire to be creative, you're keeping the child inside alive.*

- Director John Cassavetes

Is maintaining creativity throughout older life an example of defeating age as Sophia Loren suggests? Is it preserving the child within as John Cassavetes says? Perhaps creative aging is simply a way to accept growing old by inviting the elder self to express the creativity within. Sadly many people accept the myths and prejudices that mark the “older one” as the “no longer creative one.” This is especially true in the entertainment industry.

In her book *The Fountain of Age* author Betty Friedan interviewed a wide range of people



**How does this poster challenge stereotypical beliefs that older people have lost their creative spark?**

who have bought into these myths which she terms the “age mystique”:

Even so-called creative professionals can be induced by the age mystique into premature retirement...I encountered vital able Hollywood screenwriters and directors in their fifties and sixties, with successful comedies, series and dramas behind them, who decided to “get out of the industry” because twenty-seven-year old editors or program vice presidents “don’t even see me,” “can’t hear what I’m saying,” “don’t get the meaning somehow” (Friedan, 1993, p. 212).

This title of a 1997 article in the academic journal, *Sex Roles* makes the case that this “age mystique” is often coupled with the feminine mystique as well: “The Aging Woman in Popular Film: Underrepresented, Unattractive, Unfriendly, and Unintelligent” (Bazzini et al., 1997).

Of course there are exceptions to the “age mystique” prejudice in Hollywood. Elder actors and actresses have won their share of Academy Awards. Jessica Tandy won the Best Actress Oscar at the age of 80. Katherine Hepburn won three of her four Oscars after she turned 60. Director Clint Eastwood won the Best Director Oscar at 62 and again at 74.

One important way to challenge the stereotypes that suggest that older people are not creative is to make sure that older people are depicted in the media in ways that demonstrate creativity. A pioneering study of positive treatments of creative elders in film was undertaken by Robert Yahnke, professor of Film and the Arts at the University of Minnesota. His research was published in the journal *Gerontology and Geriatrics Education* with the title “Heroes of Their Own Stories: Expressions of Aging in International Cinema” (Yahnke, 2005).

### Turning the Camera on Imagination

The goals of the curriculum *Creativity and Aging Through the Lens of Film* are strongly reflected in Yahnke’s article:

Aging across the life course, in international cinema, is based upon three straightforward themes: childhood and adolescence is a time for mentoring by elders; middle age is a time for resolving mid-life crises (with the assistance of elders), and old age is a time for expressing one’s wisdom and equanimity through contributions to the wider community. In other words, the life course in international cinema is based upon the strengths and positive values of active elders, who are an integral part of family and community contexts...

These films offer students of global aging an opportunity to comprehend the experience of aging from the elder’s perspective. Film has the power to convey complex, three-dimensional images of old age... Using film as an adjunct to theories about global aging can help students more clearly grasp the individuality and idiosyncrasies of old age. (Yahnke, 2005, p. 59)

This awareness of the role that film can play in deepening society’s appreciation for the creative opportunities in aging has given rise to new films, film festivals, college courses and to this curriculum. In February 2009 the First International Film Festival on Aging was presented by the Pacific Institute and the AgeSong Senior Communities. Its home page described the intention of the festival organizers: “The work our organizations do advocates for a humanistic society that accepts and celebrates the richness of our Elders. The films in our Festival help to challenge and change the outdated notion that our twilight years are years of decline, and presents alternative views that illustrate that these years can also be vibrant and rewarding” (<http://filmfestonaging.org>).

In 2009 a new film, *The Creative Power of Aging*, was under production by the Minnesota Creative Arts and Aging Network. The Ithaca College Linden Center for Creativity and Aging now offers courses, exhibits and workshops for community elders and college gerontology majors in the areas of Performing and Visual Arts and Literary and Media. For creative elders and their young followers the second decade of the 21st century is shaping up to be a time of both affirmation and celebration.

*The world we live in today — our language, art, music, literature, drama, and technology — was brought into being by thousands of generations that recognized the true worth of human longevity. We possess culture because our ancestors had the wisdom to distinguish vigor from value. They saw, as we so often do not, beyond mere physical strength and grasped the virtues hidden within the necessity of growing old.*

- William H. Thomas  
*What Are Old People For?*



**Why might the webpage designer have chosen this photograph for the central placement on this webpage?**