

SERMON: *Essential Others* by James “Chip” Roush

How many of you have seen an article or a news story
about someone who is still running marathons at age 85,
or painting masterpieces at 92?

How many have seen exposés of nursing homes
where people like our parents or grandparents
are tied into wheelchairs
and forced to live out their lives in lonely, boring, awful circumstances?
How many of you have wondered how you might end up,
as you mark your 70th, or 80th, or 100th birthday?

I wonder about it, too.
As medical science improves,
and as long as I still qualify for health insurance,
it is possible that I will live well beyond retirement.
I am more than a little interested
in what that will be like.

Fortunately for me, Dr. George E. Vaillant is also interested
in how to remain healthy and happy into old age.
His book, *Aging Well*, is subtitled
“Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life.”
He offers seven factors that predict successful aging.

Vaillant derives these factors from the Harvard Study of Adult Development,
in which over 800 women and men
have answered questionnaires
and taken physicals
and been interviewed regularly throughout their lives.

These studies are still the longest-running
longitudinal studies of human development
ever attempted.
They tell an invaluable story of how we change and adapt as we age.
Now, these studies are not perfect.
There are many more men than women,
and there are almost no blacks in the subject population.
There are people of different classes, different social locations,
but they are all from the United States in the 20th century.
So we cannot say that these findings
are definitive for every human in every life situation.
But they are very similar, across gender and class boundaries,
so it is at least plausible that they hold in general.

Of course, as good Unitarian Universalists,
you are going to judge the results
according to your own experience, anyway,
so I offer you Vaillant's conclusions
for you to consider
through the lens of your own lives.

First of all, let me share some of the factors that did NOT predict successful aging.

Ancestral longevity.

It turns out, it does not really matter if your parents and grandparents live long lives.
It doesn't hurt to come from a long-lived family,
but your choices, and your relationships, are much more important than your genes.

Cholesterol.

A subject's cholesterol level at age fifty had no bearing
on whether she or he was happy and healthy at age eighty.
I am not suggesting that you should totally *ignore* your cholesterol.
Particularly if you have already had a heart attack,
it is important to reduce your cholesterol.
Otherwise, it may not be as crucial as TV advertising might suggest.

Stress.

It may seem counter-intuitive,
since stress can cause headaches, ulcers,
and cause us to lose sleep.
However, it appears that if we live long enough,
we recover from those adverse effects.
Again, I am not saying that we should seek out stressful situations,
but I am offering reassurance
that any stress you are experiencing now
will not necessarily prevent you from enjoying a successful old age.

Okay, so stress may not prevent it,
but what will *encourage* a long and happy life?
Vaillant reports seven factors that predict healthy aging.
They are not smoking, mature defenses, not abusing alcohol, a committed relationship,
weight, exercise and education.

By far, the most important factor was smoking.
If you have never smoked,
or if you quit by the time you are fifty,
you are quite simply more likely to be alive at 75.

The first step toward feeling happy and healthy is to be alive in the first place. Nicotine is the most addictive substance known to science. It can be very, very difficult to quit. But at least according to this study, it is definitely worth it.

The second most important factor for healthy aging is what Vaillant calls “mature defenses.” Our defenses are the ways that our unconscious mind deals with the pain and conflicts of human life. Everybody has them, everybody uses them. Most importantly, everybody uses different defenses at different times. There are a couple dozen different mechanisms that help us cope with our suffering. Vaillant defines them as more or less mature depending upon how likely they are to allow us to experience future growth. Immature defenses are more likely to close us off to future experience, and thereby prevent future growth, whereas mature defenses leave us open to later possibilities.

To make this more concrete, I will offer a few examples. You may have heard the terms *repression* and *suppression*. Sometimes, when feeling an emotion is too dangerous, we may bury it deep inside ourselves. A child may be angry at his or her caregiver, but it may feel too dangerous to express that emotion—the child is dependent upon the caregiver for food and shelter. So the child might repress those feelings, and shut them off entirely.

Unfortunately, this can lead to the child being unable to feel that emotion at all. Even years later, he or she may have difficulty expressing that repressed feeling, even in circumstances where it is normal or necessary to do so. Vaillant would call this an immature defense.

A similar, but more mature, defense is suppression. When, for example, you choose not to scream at your boss, or your customer, or child, but rather count to ten, and reply calmly, and then walk away and later talk to a friend or partner and express your true anger, that is suppression. It still bottles up the emotion inside, but for a shorter time. A person whose unconscious mind uses suppression is better able to feel and express their emotions, and to continue to learn how better to express or use them, as they age.

Vaillant therefore considers suppression a mature defense.

Now, I want to stress that these are *unconscious* defenses.

We do not choose them; they do not make us good or bad people—
although they can make our lives more or less difficult in the future.
Our minds simply make the best use of what is available at the time.
Fortunately, as we age,
our subconscious often learns to use more mature defenses.

The pulse of life, throbbing in us all,
is always trying to thrive, to blossom more completely through us.
As we see other human beings demonstrate different ways of coping,
and as we test out different approaches ourselves,
our unconscious learns what works better,
what enables us to handle conflict without making future circumstances worse.
As we age, we almost inevitably use more mature defense mechanisms.
This process is not irreversible.
Sometimes, when there is too much pain in too little time,
we may again resort to immature defenses.
Again, our mind does whatever it has to, to cope with its environment.
But as long as we are alive,
and as long as we are exposed to other people, who use mature defenses,
we can adapt and change and grow ourselves.
{beat}

Thus it appears
that the various people in our lives
have a pretty large impact on how mentally healthy we are,
on how successfully we cope with the vicissitudes of life,
and on how happy we will be as we age.

The branch of psychology
that studies the effects of other people on a person's development
is called Self Psychology.
One of its most important thinkers was Heinz Kohut,
who, by the way, attended the First Unitarian Society in Hyde Park, in the 1970s.

Kohut examined the ways that human beings need relationships with others
in order to live up to their full potential health.
Kohut found three primary ways that a person benefits from others.
He called these mirroring, idealization, and twinship.
Oversimplifying quite a bit, these mean being told that one is good,
that one is safe, and that one is like others.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment,
and imagine that you are a young child.

Imagine that an adult whom you love—a parent, a teacher, a neighbor, somebody—
tells you how clever you are, or how fast a runner, or how good an artist.

Doesn't that feel good?

Without opening your eyes, imagine your boss,
or your partner, or your parent,
telling you that you did a good job on that last project,
or that you handled a situation with your teenager well,
or that you look great in that sweater.

Doesn't that feel good, too?!

Kohut would call that mirroring,
and he points out that we need to be mirrored throughout our lives.

Now, imagine as a young child,
sitting in the lap of an adult whom you love and trust.

Imagine curling up there,
the adult's arms wrapped around you,
and feeling completely safe and secure.

That is idealization.

As adults, we still need to feel safe,
and we also need to respect and admire others.

Finally, imagine being scared of a thunderstorm, or of the dentist,
and imagine an adult telling you that she or he is scared, too,
but that you can get through it together.

That is twinship.

As an adult, imagine being disappointed by a movie that the critics all recommended.
Then you hear your best friend voice disappointment, too.

It feels validating.

Imagine attending a cancer-survivor's support group,
and learning that your feelings are not abnormal,
that you are not alone in your emotions and perceptions.

It can be vital to experience such twinship.

Kohut called such experiences selfobjects.

This is a clumsy term,

so more recent researchers use the term "essential others."

Our subjective experiences of other people,
telling us that we are good, or safe, or not alone,
are our essential others.

Books and jobs and ideas and churches can also function as essential others; they also can be experienced as providing support. But it is most often our experience of another person that serves as an essential other.

If we are lucky,
we will have enough essential others in our life,
as children, as teens, and as adults,
that we will learn to cope with conflict and suffering in mature ways.
If we are less lucky,
in other words, if we are just about everybody,
we will grow up with an insufficient amount of support.
We will not receive enough mirroring,
or idealization, or twinship,
and we will continue to struggle and seek out that support.
Happily, we *can* find it later in life,
it happens all the time,
but it reinforces our need for essential others throughout our lives.

How many of you have seen the picture of the baby monkey,
clinging to a cloth-covered fake mother,
while there is another fake mother,
made of wire mesh and a bottle of milk, right next to it?
The experiment proved that monkeys need warmth, and softness, and *comfort*
as much as they need food.
That image is seared into my mind,
and I think the lesson applies to humans, as well.
We need to be loved, and supported,
and told that we are good and safe and not alone
almost as much as we need food and shelter.
Vaillant reports that the adults he studied,
who had the most mature defense mechanisms
and, not coincidentally, the most success in life,
were those people whose parents or caregivers
allowed them to fully express their feelings when they were young.
If our caregivers are scared of our emotions,
or condemn them as somehow inappropriate,
then we will not learn to cope with our feelings in successful ways,
and it will require much more time,
and relationships with other essential others,
before we learn to handle our human feelings.

If our parents allow us the space to feel our emotions,
and guide us toward safe ways of expressing them,
and model good emotional coping skills themselves,
then we are much more likely to develop mature defenses early in life.

When parents or caregivers remain with sick children,
when they stay with kids who are crying or ranting
or otherwise trying to cope with pain or conflict,
then the children learn to deal with their own pain.
They learn that it will eventually end, to bear it successfully,
and they may even learn to plan for future disappointments and conflicts.

Again, no parent so far has gotten it exactly right,
and when our parents do not do it,
then we can still get it from friends or teachers or ministers
or any of thousands of other possible essential others in our lives.
And even if our parents did do everything perfectly right,
we would still need essential others as adults,
as we face the challenges and trials of later life stages.
Remember Vaillant's quote,
"It is not the bad things that happen to us that doom us;
it is the good people who happen to us at any age
that facilitate enjoyable old age."

How many of you ever watched Mr. Rogers on TV?
Fred Rogers helped a couple generations of children
cope with the difficulties of growing up in the late 20th century.
He was a fine example of an essential other.
In 1999, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award
from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

During his acceptance speech,
he asked the audience to take
"ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are,
those who have cared about you
and wanted the best for you in life.
Ten seconds. I'll watch the time."
Then he raised his arm, and looked at his watch, and was silent for ten seconds.
When the time was up,
Mr. Rogers told the audience how pleased those people would be,
to know how highly they were thought of.
The camera panned through the crowd,
full of high-powered executives and big stars,
and there were tears on faces everywhere.

This morning, I will make the same invitation.
Think of the people who have served as your essential others—
think of those who have helped you become who you are,
those who have cared for you, and who wanted the best for you.
I'll watch the time.

{ 10 seconds }

The people of whom you were just thinking—
the relationships with caring people—
are our real wealth in this world.
We have many essential others in our lives.
And whether you know it or not,
you serve as an essential other to someone else.
There is a child, or a coworker, or a neighbor,
or a perfect stranger whom you allowed into traffic,
whose feels better about his or her life because of you.

Our mental health depends upon our relationships,
both in the past and in the present.
Our mental health twenty, or thirty, or fifty years from now
depends upon our choices,
and to a huge extent, upon our relationships.
Even one good friendship can do wonders,
and it is never too late
to begin to seek out or create such relationships.
We are not only interconnected, or interdependent, on each other—we are *essential*.

So may we be.

Sermon delivered at Berrien UU Fellowship February 27, 2005