

To Put Our Oars Together

Jennie Chin Hansen



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I've never really taken the time to write a story about our family. There've been surrogate opportunities when others have done interviews over the past years and I've been able to "piece together" a bit of a life story. My son had actually asked me to do a reflection some time ago, so I thank you in advance for this gift of completing a project I've only thought about.

I'm so grateful for these amazing gifts that come across in life for me. Because I have these opportunities, it's so important for me to steward these resources well. It strikes me is that there's a special responsibility, a moral imperative, to be in service to others because some of us have been given opportunities that others may not have had. Thank you for this luxury of engaging in some reflection, because the pace of daily life is just so full that carving out this space and uncovering things that perhaps haven't had a chance to be articulated or integrated out loud is a true blessing.

My parents were both immigrants from China. Of my four grandparents I only met and knew one of them, my paternal grandfather. In fact, I wrote an essay about him, related to caring and his holding my hand. I remember that he was very old and bent over, but he was very playful. You wouldn't know it now, given the weight that I carry, but when I was young I had chronic tonsillitis and wouldn't eat. He would be playful with me trying to coax me to eat. I knew what he was doing when he'd race with me to finish our respective meals. I knew that he cared about me. We both knew what he was trying to achieve, and I respected that.

My parents were probably more direct about my eating issue, but my grandfather had a sense of play and understanding, perhaps of what it was like for a little child to not be forced to eat. I appreciated that he was just trying to achieve the same goal as my parents, but, he was just playful in that process.

My father, as an adult immigrant, although highly educated in China, ended up working in restaurants due to his limited English speaking ability. He served in the U.S. Army during WWII in the European front, learned some functional English and became a US citizen as a result of his military service. During my growing up I recognized he held a blue collar job working in restaurants which he truly enjoyed, but I also knew that he had a tremendous literate background which he nurtured by his self-taught English.

In contrast, my mother, who grew up in a village and did not have much beyond an eighth grade education as was customary for girls, was really very bright. One of the things that I recognize is that when I encounter people, for example, when I ride taxicabs in cities (which I do especially in Washington, D.C.), so many of these drivers have tremendous backgrounds in their native countries that may not be obvious just because of their ostensible current blue collar job.

That experience, with my parents as immigrants and living through their first level of opportunities in this country, impressed on me that intelligent individuals who had much to offer may not be recognized by the more influential population. To this day, I have some of my greatest brief conversations with taxi drivers, and even the person who drove me to my hotel today. He is from Ethiopia and knew so much about our political dynamics, economic infrastructure, the futuristic trends here, yet he happens to be in a role as a sedan driver.

People have capacity, intelligence, wishes, and desires, whether you are poor, middle class, or upper class. There is a whole underbelly of real people who have potential and knowledge that we need to respect and understand. As a result, I transfer my background, having been raised by immigrant parents and knowing their capacity, to many others I come across who may not have been born here in America.

It's not just those in power, but all of us who make the greatness of our country possible. I think we all have the desire and wish to both do well and be an important part of society here. These two kinds of childhood influences, my grandfather and my parents, were really significant for me.

I didn't speak English when I went to school, so by default I was in the immersion approach to learning language. I understood how isolating that can feel. I can still remember how my brother took me to school the first day and he told my teacher that I didn't speak any English at all. He just made sure that I knew how to get to the bathroom, and I was on my own.

I remember cleaning all the bathrooms when I went to use the bathroom. I think I was so stressed at first that I just stayed there; in fact, I found that I was unable to actually use the commode if I heard anyone else in the room!. When I was finally by myself in the facility, I cleaned all the toilets there, just because I knew it was something that I could do. That was THE kindergarten experience I can remember.

Another cultural value I learned was that of interdependence. I remember taking my mother for her citizenship test. I think I was seven years old when she qualified as a resident to take the test. I would coach her on learning the exam questions that she would have to take. I just found myself not thinking about it at the time, coaching my mother English so that she could pass the citizenship test, but the intergenerational aspect of teamwork for the family good and that she'd be a "full member of society."

So I think respect, intergenerational awareness, the responsibility we had for others, and my parents helped throughout my life. Just the fact that they gave willingly and with no expectations but knowing it was the right thing to do, is why we take care of our family. That sense of caring for others, providing respect and assuring dignity was essential to my growing up.

Some of my influence from them came a little later, too. I can still remember

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having these really late night or early morning conversations with my father about art. Here this man is working in a restaurant with a whole other dimension about him that wasn't able to be expressed. He painted a bit, and he had a deep sense of beauty and philosophy. I could see the multiple dimensions, multiple reflections, of a man I saw working hard to provide for his family, yet there was a very larger dimension of him that I discovered and appreciated when I was older.

Another thing that I think was one of the greatest gifts of growing up is that my father trusted my decisions even from a young age. He conveyed that whatever decision I made, was probably the right decision, so he didn't second guess me. When I made a decision, say, to go to graduate school, my mother was worried that I might get too much education and thus take myself out of the marketplace of finding a husband! That was the belief from the traditional world in which she was raised.

But she went along with it, and I just knew that they trusted that whatever I decided they would accept and support. That was a little unusual for growing up in an ethnocentric community where there were certain things that girls were expected to do or not do at that time.

My parents allowed me that expression differently. My father was always a little bit cautious. He didn't want me to get physically hurt and things like that, but my mother was always an adventurer. I would always tell her when I did some risky kinds of things, and I would let her know in advance, but I wouldn't tell my father until afterwards. She was somebody who was a risk taker and allowed me that freedom to test different things, whereas my father was the kind, sweet man who believed in me.

Those two sets of gifts, of trying something different on my mother's side and knowing that my parents would accept my decisions, from my father's side, gave me core gifts of exploration and believing that if I tried something I could do it.

I just felt very, very lucky. My mother was just a hoot, in that she was very different from a lot of the other immigrant Chinese mothers in our community. She liked to travel and she liked eating pizza, which is just so unusual in a kind of first generation ethnic community, trying different foods and enjoying them! So today whenever I go any place different, I will try whatever the local specialty is, just to test out something different. She loved discovering new things.

I think in my early school years I was just a regular good student. I didn't stand out *per se*, and it wasn't until probably college that sprouting my wings started to occur. I went to an all girls public school, Girls' Latin School in Boston, that had a tremendous influence on me. It was a rigorous British-styled school. I took two years of Latin and two years of French, but that ability to have a very British structure was very helpful to me.

I liked being in an all girls school. At that time it was very common in Boston. All the public schools were actually sex segregated in high schools. Some of the girls kind of bristled that we couldn't cheerlead at the boy's Latin school. That was somewhat important to me, but the sense of community by going to an all girls school seemed to be very helpful to me in terms of my ability to develop. I participated in some of the clubs but didn't rise to any leadership positions. It just gave me a kind of comfort zone to being in a same sex school at that particular time.

I was very active in our Chinatown community in Boston with a Maryknoll nun's community center. It was what I would call the Americanization of the com-

munity of Chinese children, all of whom came from a very ethnocentric Chinese culture. That was a powerful experience, understanding how to set a Western table because we basically used chopsticks and a spoon. We didn't use the kind of table settings that I know well today.

The nuns introduced us to the Girl Scout world. We had an all Chinese Girl Scout troop. We earned and wore badges. That became such an important social anchor for many of us to interface with the broader world of being "American." I'll never forget that became my introduction to American food. We had some camping experiences so it was a very wonderful exploration and set of discoveries for us.

There was one nun who had a great impact on me. She spoke English with words that I didn't understand. They seemed to be complex words, and that factor, added with my Latin school background, gave me the boost to learn language really well. As a result, I have the kind of Latin root vocabulary that I continue to rely upon and really enjoy the use and construction of language. I really trace that interest back to her.

I was able to locate her just a couple of years ago. She was no longer a nun, had married, and now lived in the Washington, D.C., area. I contacted her, having not been in touch with her for 45 years, and met with her for tea. She was stunned to realize what an impact she had on my life. It was just great that I could thank her so directly for the difference she made in my growing up. Since this interview I have transitioned to my role as president at AARP and invited her to my transition dinner where I was able to acknowledge her during the evening. One never knows how individuals can come into your life and really touch your life.

The nuns also had a volunteer auxiliary of single Catholic women who wanted to help in the community. I was assigned a woman who would visit with me periodically. I remember she worked downtown in the department store in Boston called R.H. Stearn, which was one of these elegant old department stores. She worked in the glove department, and would take me occasionally for lunch.

Through junior high and high school, as well as early college, I can still remember that she would take me to lunch. I had some part-time jobs in college, and thus I wanted to pay for her lunch, but she said no. I remember her telling me that it was not necessary, but that some day I'd have the opportunity to do this for somebody else. That was a very important experience for me. These were the kind of social underpinnings, and the values that people have conveyed that made such a deep impression on me.

When I was in high school, I ended up volunteering at hospitals. I was a candy striper for years and really enjoyed it. I thought the setting of a hospital and helping people heal and get well was the thing to do. At that time there seemed to be just a few options for women to go into given the role models I had seen. I was still drawn to nursing anyway, because the sense of caring for others was something that was probably fairly deep in my sense of who I was. I enjoyed being helpful, and I also enjoyed science.

At that point in time, women more or less went into either teaching or nursing. I had the opportunity to go to Radcliffe, which would have been a very different experience, but I actually felt intimidated going from our Chinatown community to something of that nature. So I didn't take up that opportunity, but one thing I did do is interview at different colleges.

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When I decided to go into nursing, I actually met with different schools. I had a series of questions that I asked the deans, and to this day, I'm amazed I had the audacity to do that! The dean of the School of Nursing at Boston College where I eventually went, Rita Kelleher, who recently turned 100 years old, tracked me down, about five, six years ago. She remembered that she thought it was just so unusual that a student would actually come and interview her about her program.

I have no idea what gave me the guts or the right that I thought that I could interview the schools to decide where I wanted to go, but I just did it. I ended up being the only Asian female in the entire undergraduate and graduate campus at the time. Even though I obviously stood out now, I had an incredible experience in college. I'm happy to note that I have also gone to visit Dean Kelleher at her assisted living facility where she lives today.

When I learned I was to be awarded an honorary doctorate from Boston College, I called her to share this news. She was so delighted and especially since I am the first nursing alumna from our School to be accorded this recognition.

It was at Boston College when the most exploration really occurred for me. I had a chance to hear my voice. I also had the opportunity to learn about leadership, perhaps not in a direct way but by default. I ran for student government on campus and ended up one of the two nursing students who sat on the university senate. My best friend, Nancy (Turletes) Murphy, held the other seat.

It was during that part of history, in the late 60s, that there was something very significant in the air that we were breathing. It was the period of civil rights and the Vietnam War. I was part of that whole energy of the campus and the nation of other young people at that point. I think that was the heyday of awareness and a sense of social responsibility that became a very important anchor of influence in my life.

I realize this harkens back to my earlier comments about just respecting the integrity and the capacity, the emotional as well as the intellectual capacities, of all people regardless of their formal education or economic status. That was something formed very deeply, that sense of social justice was built in from personal experience that evolved from living through those times.

I feel that I was just born in times with parents and with influences that allowed me to accrue a particular sense of how to look at humanity. That way of seeing the world continues to this day in my life and work. I have respect for institutions yet find opportunities for change from within. Social justice, democratic means, capitalism. That's my three-legged stool.

I had little exposure to the commercial or market-driven world until these most recent years. I would say that a lot has happened actually in the past couple of years to help me appreciate that dimension in our democracy with market forces that drive change. The possibility of what the market does, without judgment of good or bad, is a powerful force for change, in addition to the more traditional advocacy approaches and infrastructure building of communities that I've experienced.

This comes as a later life blessing to realize a much more holistic picture of what our incredible democracy allows us to do in our society here. That's been a growth piece for me that I've built on to the social justice and democracy components. Through AARP I've learned so much more of the multiple dimensions that make it possible to enable a vision for a decent society.

When I was in nursing education and training, I had a chance to peek under the surface level of health care in hospitals. I realized how hierarchical it was as well as how disrespectful it could often be to both patients and people who were not physicians or in the top echelon in the system. I don't think that it is structured intentionally but I just really didn't like that. That fundamentally disturbed me, even though it was a structure intended to help people. The way it was executed didn't seem to allow for the fact that we were working together on behalf of people's well being.

When I was tending to a gentleman about to have his leg amputated and heard a doctor speak to a group of interns about him as if he were a commodity, I couldn't help myself. I went to the doctor and said, "Couldn't you see what you were saying about him was doing to that man?" I thought and felt this is just not right! I actually developed an aversion to hospitals and decided soon afterwards that despite conventional wisdom, I would work in a community setting.

I just found that the structure and the deep-seeded culture of acknowledging people by hierarchy rather than having the work of what had to be done as the driver was not something that could be achieved in the hospital systems I experienced. I ended up working more in people's natural environments, bringing a set of knowledge and skills that would enable their life to be better and setting up systems that would hopefully allow them to be more capable. Bringing my expertise or learning to an environment to understand where people were, and then together we create something that has usefulness and meaning, probably started quite early from the strong reaction that I had in hospitals.

One experience that I remember very vividly was when I worked as a hospital nurse's aide during a summer while I was in college. My social group was the nurses' aides and kitchen staff. During break time we would have tea and toast in the kitchen and the nurses would all go off separately. This one wonderful person, who was a kitchen aide, said, "You know, Jennie, you really are such a nice person. I just hope that when you become a registered nurse that you don't become like them." That was a very powerful statement that I've never forgotten.

I palpably experienced how differentiated the hierarchical crowd with power was from the rest of us. It wasn't that there were understandable differences, but it was how we were regarded. I was then part of the team scrubbing the beds, helping with the hygiene, which I knew to be vital work. The ability for a system to respect people for the fact that we're all working on behalf of the care of people was something that I found wasn't really easy in that structure. The respect, dignity, and contribution that a team of people doing work on behalf of a purpose was something I just didn't find easily manifested in hospitals from my lens at that time.

I opted for community nursing, where you work with people directly; you use your judgment, make decisions, and consult when you need to. I worked as a community health nurse for a time and then I ended up also being a public health nurse in Idaho. I found that helping people maintain their health again enabled their wellness.

I remember when I worked in this public health office in Moscow, Idaho. A gentleman came in just panicked. He said he was bleeding to death based on what he observed when he went to the bathroom. I calmly asked him what he ate the day before, and it turns out he ate a lot of beets. It was just something as simple as that. He was so relieved! I thought it was just great that I could do something as

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simple as that to help provide the knowledge to reassure him he was okay.

But I also learned about what it took to influence change in farm country the hard way. At first I didn't understand the local mores of what was important at first to that community. I had all this information about how to assess the public health of a community. I saw that there was a high pregnancy rate, as well as child abuse, along with other health issues that could be altered for the better health of this community.

The need seemed obvious, to me, at least. But despite my "fancy research" and laid out "facts," the decision makers weren't there. I learned a humbling lesson about knowing what's important to people before trying to convey how important you think it is to try to change something. Change management 101!

That was a huge lesson for me about influences, the appropriate way and time of action for any kind of system change. You really have to put in your time, do your homework to appreciate what's really important to people, and what would be the levers to create effective change. So it took more than a year and a half, but positive change did occur. I completely changed my approach to addressing this particular issue. I learned a life lesson during this attempt to be a "helpful change agent" in a logging and farming community. As they say, there's no "I" in the word team.

You do need to get the facts, but you also must understand the politics and package the information so it makes sense to the people you are trying to serve. If you want people to really help others, you have to realize what is important to them.

Around this time both my mother and my father's health had been declining. My father had had his first stroke during that time, and so I was running back and forth from Idaho to Boston as a kind of long distance caregiver. And right around that same time my husband was diagnosed with cancer, a brain tumor. And I was also pregnant. So we were expecting, my father had a stroke, and my husband had cancer. It was a very stressful time in my life. I was kind of managing my father's care all from a distance. I would have to fly back to Boston, where my parents were, at the same time my husband also was so ill. We got through it, but I understand the stress of the caregiver role.

My husband died from his brain tumor. I was a widow with a year-old toddler and the whole question would be: do I move back to Boston to take care of my parents? I had moved to San Francisco where I was working as a researcher at On Lok Senior Health Services.

There was something about just being there. You could feel the changes. Here were really smart people ready to try something new in the way we could care for frail elders. The executive director, Marie Louise Ansak, at that time said, "Why don't you bring your parents out here?"

That was a huge blessing and a gift because I knew that people could be cared for differently despite their impairments. I first brought my mother out with me, and she lived with me for a few months. Ironically it was my father who used to take care of my mother and now he was the one in the nursing home.

I would take her to work with me and she would get great services during the day. At home I'd care for her as she tried to manage, including her incontinence. I still remember stripping the bed sheets before work, going daily to the laundromat in order to manage.

But when I went to see my father in Boston, I was lucky then to see, along

with a colleague's assessment, that my father actually had greater capacity than many of the physicians at the nursing home thought that he did. I didn't agree with their treatment and decided we were going to bring him to San Francisco. So I discharged him "against medical advice;" there's a term for that, called AMA.

He had a feeding tube that went down to his stomach, which I removed before we got on the plane. With my limited budget I had bought an economy seat. Given how frail my father was, the wonderful staff at United Airlines ended up giving us first class seats. So here's my father on the plane, impaired from two strokes and having had a feeding tube, sitting in a first class seat. Of course they served food during that time, and they had shrimp. I looked at it and I said, "Do you want to try this?" When he nodded "yes," I cut it up, and he actually ate solid food for the first time in probably seven months on this plane.

His first meal was there, and that was just amazing. I found that he actually had some swallowing capacity. They had not focused on that ability he had. He was taught to swallow again and he never had the stomach surgery that they had planned on.

That night, when I helped my father and my mother into my bed, they slept together for the first time in seven months. I honestly felt that if either of them had died the next day, it would have been all right because I was finally able to put them back together again. Here were two people who had worked so hard, had struggled through so much. They had had the courage to leave their native country, losing their social order of power and hierarchy. How could I let them have an end to their lives that was less than dignified?

After my father started at On Lok, the physical therapists worked with him so he was able to stretch out his body again, to unfurl his tight muscles. His medications went from fourteen in the nursing home to three. And he had a chance to know his grandson for five more years.

One other real impressionable time that I had in nursing school that relates to my father and food is when I was probably a first-year nursing student. We had what we used to call hobos at that time. It was not the homeless, but it was the same thing and this was in the middle of winter in Boston. I worked in the big public hospital, Boston City.

There was this elderly man who was a patient on my assigned floor. We served meals from these big food carts. We had oatmeal in a big vat, and I remember serving him a bowl of oatmeal. I was so impressed that this was like prime rib to him, and how much that really meant to him. So again, just recognizing how things are relative. People get used to luxuries and all, but it's so important to remember how things are relative to the individual and communities.

Another thing I remember during this same time was when I was this perky 19-year-old nursing student caring for older people. I came upon another individual like this man who said he didn't feel there was anything to live for. But as a 19 year old, I didn't have a lot of insight. I just said, "Don't worry. You will get better. You'll do all right."

And it struck me at that moment that I was setting my life stage and my values on this gentleman whose life was very different. I realized then how important it is not to put our values or our perspectives onto other people. Between the oatmeal and the ability to recognize there was reason for him to feel depressed. It was

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fine that I would be pleasant but it wasn't always necessary, or always helpful to be Nurse Sunshine, for somebody whose life course might be very different from mine.

So there were many awakenings by viewing the perspective of the other person that I learned very, very early on that being the expert and wearing the "I have the experience. I'm giving you what might be beneficial for you," lens, and to avoid that whole inadvertent paternalism that can occur in people who are "caregivers."

And again, it's about believing in all of our capacity. I think that we all have much more going for us than is ever both fully recognized or used. Not always believing in the "experts," having, at times, a certain degree of skepticism, and using some common sense, goes a long way.

I had been with On Lok nearly 25 years. In developing the program, we were asking, "Why can't we change the rules? Why not let people age in place, in their community?" Imagine living 70-plus years a certain way. Why should the things that had such meaning for you all those years not be part of the final years of your life? We identified the core ingredients of health services, ways that existing services didn't come together really well, and reformulated this so that it really worked for the local community. Our driving philosophy was care with dignity and respect for cultural values. Our approach actually produced a quality of service that people were happier with.

The teamwork at On Lok is really interesting because physicians were a part of our system, as well. Of course, doctors are highly respected and regarded for their role and their expertise and things that only they can do. But in order to care for somebody who has multiple complexities that are not just medical problems, I love that On Lok took into account all these other people who had something to contribute toward the well-being and the capacity of the people we care for.

Even though nurses and social workers are educated to deal with depression, something we found out was sometimes it was the janitor who had the best relationship with the people being cared for. Sometimes we brought them into our team because they're part of the helping and caring process for that individual.

It doesn't mean that just because I have a master's degree and a credential in a particular focus that I may be the best person to have the most helpful impact for this individual. One of the things that I loved about On Lok was that we shared this technical knowledge, but maybe it's a different person who actually does the implementation. So it's not about me, it's about our goal, and that is the person you are caring for.

We would have staff who might not be formally educated but understands what the intervention was designed to accomplish and could be part of the team to carry it out. An analogy might be a good football team. You know the quarterback has a certain role, yet sometimes things don't quite go right. Still, we all know where the goal post is so somebody else picks up, and we keep going for the goal. This team aspect is something that I love about the whole On Lok and PACE program. We're clear what our mission is, and it's not about just us as individuals, even though we may have specific academic preparation, licenses, and experience. But we put our skills on the table for achieving our goal.

I think we get often too stuck on credentials. That's not to take away from the hard work that people put in to achieving those credentials and experience, but cre-

dentials should be a means to serve. They shouldn't be an end to themselves.

Even today, as I've had some experience now resuming teaching nursing again, I have a heightened sensitivity to the background, perspectives, and the skills that the nursing students bring.

We had a recent episode in a seminar where the students were talking about the cycling of patients through the emergency room because many end up using the ER like their health clinic. There were some reactions, some twittering from the students, oh yeah, they see that. Another student said, "Oh, we shouldn't be judging people so readily on this. My father has diabetes and he was in a diabetic coma; they thought he was a drunk." In reality, he had a reaction and they treated him as though he were one of these frequent fliers, as they call them. Not only was this an important point of the individual, it gives us the time to question why does our system even operate in this manner, treating an ER as a primary care site?

These are learning moments. You have to give people the regard and respect they deserve and not just pass judgments on them. It's very important to recognize the other people on the team. I brought up the example of the janitor in the ER who knows a lot of what's going on and can be reassuring to the other people so that he or she actually is part of the team.

Again, it's the humanity and respect that there are other people besides professionals with whom we work as a team. That's something that I find pleasure in now, helping students not get into "we are the professional and they are the paraprofessional." It's about the fact that we do have different roles but we still are here for a core purpose together.

Having been a parent gives a richness and awareness of the huge responsibility we have in shaping and supporting the life of another person who's going to steward this world's resources when we're gone. I've had a tremendous and wonderful relationship with my son, Erik, especially when I was a single parent before I married my current husband, Philip Abrams (who, incidentally, was his second grade teacher).

Having an incredibly supportive husband, who is amazing in his support for my work, is a treasure and blessing. He both enjoys what I do and participates in what I do. I play a little golf with him. I play golf poorly, but I enjoy it when I'm there, and he really likes getting me out for the five or six hours where I'm not totally focused on other kinds of issues. I also delight in orchids. I have well over 100 orchids and just love to go to orchid shows.

And then finally, I love to read. I continue to enjoy reading about the beginning history of our country and the amazing leadership that occurred when we went through the revolution. It's amazing to me that our country is not founded on one ethnicity's set of principles and beliefs! As a child I loved reading stories about how people lived and managed their lives. I used to go to the library in Boston every week and check out the maximum number of books which was one a day. I'd read about these people's lives and that inspires me to this very day; for example, Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt's lives, and so many other people who faced adversity and addressed issues for the greater good.

John Gardiner is another person I so admire for the legacy he's left in terms of the whole concept of servant leadership. I get inspired by people who are clear in their goals, and people who have stories of disability and manage to achieve amaz-

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ing things. It renews me when I have a chance to read about this. My husband and my son tease me. They say, "Oh, she watches these AT & T commercials and cries when there's emotion." You know, the depth of people's connection and struggle to what life brings about always inspires and renews me.

In community health, one cares for the whole age continuum. When I was a public health nurse in Idaho, I was intrigued with older people and their fierce independence. These people had few or no resources, were so isolated in rural communities, but had an absolute tenacity and dignity to make it on their own. My interest was piqued in the appreciation of older people who really wanted to maintain their abilities and their dignity to live as strongly and independently as possible.

We all have heard the saying that the older we get the more we realize what we don't know. The sense of discovery and the sense of delight is part of the lifelong learning that allows us to do that. I can't imagine that anyone could ever be bored because there's so much to both learn and to share with others.

I think the whole interest in lifelong learning is not just about the content but about the context, as well as the ability to be part of a social network. I think we need to feed our souls and our intellect; we need to nourish the realization that we are sometimes part of something larger, that there are other people with whom we can have that communion, and share in the energy and the fun. We learn something every day that adds to the weaving of new textures to our brains and hearts. We've learned that our brain is so much more plastic and able to learn and create new connections.

We can gain so much from lifelong learning as an approach to life and living. I just think that lifelong learning sets the stage for a constant state of wonder which is something that allows us the childlike appreciation of discovery. It's something that was brought up by Kali Lightfoot, the director of the OLLIs, the joy of learning. The ability to be in that sweet spot of joy is something that is about delight, and about contribution and openness, that can each add to the richness of each others' lives.

One of the things that I have loved about my work at On Lok that I think will be instructive for my future is helping us all understand that everyday issues really shape policy. What we encounter everyday and what we hope for affects all people, and despite one's partisan lens, there's an ability to find a greater umbrella of good and understanding.

We were able to transcend parochial perspectives and say there is a universality in these matters for our whole society. We appealed to the Democrats when we passed this legislation that was about providing care for vulnerable populations and to the Republicans when we were able to be more cost effective. Between the two sets of core values we were able to cross this bridge and create a new law that was bigger than one party or another.

That ability to find the common principles and ways of solving problems is something that I really relish. Now in particular, because we have so much gridlock in our political process, the ability to find those common elements that are about the stewardship of our responsibility for America's well-being is something I really look forward to figuring out and contributing to.

How can we de-politicize this process, and speak to the fact that we need to have a society that can be helpful to all people, and that has a sense of the future

that we want to both contribute to and build toward?

The role that I have at AARP will allow me access to that kind of lens and focus. Not to say that this will get solved overnight. I only have a couple of years in this role as president. These issues have been building for a long time, but I would love to use my history, my core values, and experiences directed towards the public good to contribute with meaning and substance to the yet-to-be-written chapters of our aging America.

Especially important is providing healthcare and long-term care as well as long-term economic security in the United States. By sheer timing these are the main foci of AARP also. But it is also time to bring attention to the underlying need for this society's moral compass to point American culture beyond its short-term focus on immediate problems and to the horizon issues that we need to solve in the decades ahead. So I find myself taking the next steps of my journey as part of the generation of leading-edge boomers with a sense of responsibility for advancing our next social movement.

I feel I have some control over keeping things moving on this marathon of effort, because it's not going to be a sprint, that's for sure. I get the opportunity in various ways, when people invite me to meetings like this, or when I have a few words to say when I get my honorary doctorate at Boston College.

It all helps to seed that message. There are things we can shoot for and things that we can do today. This is part of our compound interest of change. This is something that I hope to help carry during this time, and probably for the rest of my work in the future.

It's an evolution, that's for sure. I find that my lifelong learning allowed me, in my heart and in my head, a way to continue to leave a soft but good footprint but for the fact that I existed. But there are many footprints that we need to corral together.

There's perhaps a metaphor for me. I took rowing lessons with an eight person crew about ten years ago. It was funnier than all get-out. When we first started rowing in the boat, our oars were going all over the place. Over time and with work, we rowed well together. So for me, the metaphor is we can go far when our oars are all dipping in at the same time, in the same direction and using our respective strengths and skills. When it does come together, it feels like we're flying and there's such a sweetness when we achieve that. You can feel the ease, the rightness. There is magic. I hope we can put our oars together and fly towards the magic of a great America.

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