**Zoom Talk with the Little Falls Village and ED Lisa Rosenthal**

**HOW TO AGE WITH DIGNITY, VITALITY, AND HUMOR,**

**AND LIVE YOUR LIFE WITH NO REGRETS**

By Chris Palmer

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Welcome, everyone!

As Lisa mentioned, I’m writing a book about aging, dying, and death. Before I started researching this book, I believed I knew a lot about aging, but most of what I thought I knew was wrong. For example:

* I thought old age was a problem and full of suffering and stress. Wrong! Geriatricians will tell you that most older people are active, happy, and fully engaged in all kinds of exciting projects.
* I thought if you had money and your health, then old age was a breeze. Wrong! The famous longitudinal Harvard study shows that *relationships* are the key to happiness and fulfillment.
* I thought younger was always better, and that getting old meant becoming irrelevant and useless. Wrong! Many studies have shown that from childhood onwards, happiness declines, and then dramatically rises—witness the famous U-curve. Happiness in old age far exceeds that at 40. Aging results in better emotional regulation, more compassion and equanimity, more profound gratitude, and more engagement with the present.
* I thought illness and disease were an inevitable part of aging. Wrong again! The Mayo Clinic says health problems commonly attributed to aging are actually due to inactivity, unhealthy diets, smoking, or other lifestyle choices. The American Cancer Society says more than half of all cancer deaths could be prevented if Americans just took better care of themselves. In other words, we can delay the onset of disease and increase our health span—the number of years we are healthy—through better lifestyle choices.

Now some of you may be saying to yourselves, “Hold on a moment. Old age *is* a problem!” If you’re talking about *old-old* age, then I agree. Old-old age can be challenging and distressing, and I don’t want to whitewash it. Most of us strive to delay the onset of old-old age as long as possible.

Physical pain, loss of autonomy, an inability to read or hear, increasing disintegration, chronic and sudden indignities, depression, poorly-run nursing homes, over-medicalization, and so on, are all scary and alarming.

Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson called this final stage of life “the ninth stage” in his life cycle theory. It’s the time in our lives where debility and suffering have the upper hand. The ninth stage is where advance directives, Do Not Resuscitate orders, palliative care, hospice, and so on, are vital.

But today, I want to focus on the period of old age *before* we suffer from significant impairment. “Young-old age” starts at about 60 or 65 and can go on for many years if we take good care of ourselves.

I want to share some of the things I’ve been learning about aging, but let’s start with a couple of survey questions.

**SURVEY QUESTION #1**: Do genes play the primary role in longevity? Please vote YES or NO. Margo and Tina, thanks for helping with this survey. (Discuss result.) Answer: No. According to the Pew Charitable Trust, only 25 percent of aging is genetic, while 75 percent is environmental and lifestyle, including diet, exercise, relationships, stress, smoking, etc.

**SURVEY QUESTION #2**: What is the nation’s #1 health crisis? Select one from the following four choices: obesity, loneliness, cancer, heart disease. Please select one. (Discuss result). Answer: Based on research done by Dr. Emma Seppala at Stanford, nearly half of Americans feel lonely.

This Zoom event is an opportunity to spend some time thinking about your future and creating ways to be your best self as you get older. In other words, how to age with vitality, dignity, and humor and live your life with no regrets—the title of my talk.

Getting older doesn’t necessarily mean deterioration. Erikson’s ninth stage is starting later than it used to because our health spans are getting longer. As we age, we have the opportunity for personal development, for exercising wisdom, purpose, and creativity. We can build a legacy for our children and the next generation.

This opportunity for growth is what I was blind to before I started researching my book. Aging is not to be dreaded but embraced because it brings new opportunities. We can do so much more than merely survive.

A good starting point for thinking about aging is to focus on what an ideal old age would look like for you—in other words, the vision you have for yourself as you grow older.

One way of doing this is to create a personal mission statement. A personal mission statement describes what matters to you, your values, the kind of person you want to be, and what you’d like to accomplish during your life before you die.

Here are two examples of personal mission statements, even if the authors didn’t necessarily call them by that name. Arthur Conan Doyle wrote, “I should dearly love that the world should be ever so little better for my presence and that I throw all my weight on the scale of tolerance, charity, temperance, peace, and kindliness.”

And George Bernard Shaw wrote, “Life is no ‘brief candle’ to me. It is a sort of splendid torch, which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

Let’s do another survey question.

**SURVEY QUESTION #3:** How many of you have a personal mission statement? In other words, do you have a written document describing your values, what matters to you, what you hope to achieve, and what you expect your legacy will be? Please vote YES or NO. (Discuss result.)

Please don’t feel bad if you don’t have a personal mission statement. Surveys show that most people don’t. I didn’t have one until I was in my 20s, but writing one helped give me focus and purpose.

Here is one way to help create a personal mission statement. Imagine you are entering a big building. As you open the door and look inside, you see gathered about 200 people, all with their backs to you. You strain to see what they are looking at. And then you spot it. They’re looking at a casket, and you suddenly realize that you’re witnessing a funeral.

As you try to fathom what’s going on, you see a person who you know well and who loves you, standing up to give a eulogy. You realize, with great fascination, that you are witnessing your funeral and your eulogy.

What do you want to hear said about you? As you think about this, assume you’ve led an honorable and successful life, what are the assessments you would like the eulogist to make about you? What character traits and behaviors would you like the person to praise and be grateful for? What have you accomplished? Were you compassionate, kind, and generous? What kind of friend or family member were you?

Answering these questions about your best possible future self will give you the raw material for your personal mission statement.

I encourage you to take a stab at writing your personal mission statement if you don’t already have one. It doesn’t have to be perfect. It’s always evolving and a work in progress.

**QUESTIONS. Lisa, do we have any questions?**

We’ve talked so far about having a vision for your life and capturing it in a personal mission statement. Now let’s talk about setting goals derived from that vision.

As we get older, having goals can give us energy and purpose, especially when facing challenges, such as feeling anxious, sleeping poorly, feeling disconnected from loved ones, feeling in a rut, or worrying about COVID-19.

One way to organize your goals, especially your most foundational goals, is to group them according to the four fundamental dimensions of our nature—physical, social/emotional, mental, and spiritual:

*First*, physical includes exercise, diet, and sleep. As you know, moving your body every day, eating lots of fruits and vegetables, and getting sound sleep are all critical. Remember that some 70-year-olds are healthier than a sedentary 35-year-old. A shocking fact is that more than 80 million Americans over the age of six are entirely inactive. One exercise goal for you to consider doing every morning is the following: After getting out of bed, lie on your back on the floor, pull your knees up to your chest, and rock gently side to side.

*Second*, social/emotional includes love, friendship, and community. Villages like Little Falls Village and the village I belong to, Bethesda Metro Area Village, are designed to strengthen neighbors’ social and emotional bonds. One goal for you to consider in this area is writing a “gratitude” letter. This is a heartfelt letter to a person you love thanking them for their love and caring. You tell them what they mean to you. You tell them you love them. You tell them what you appreciate about them. Receiving a letter like that is deeply meaningful.

*Third*, mental includes learning, studying, and reading. One goal for you to consider in this area is writing a memoir. It doesn’t have to be lengthy. It would be part of your legacy, a gift to future generations who want to know about your successes, setbacks, and struggles. As the African proverb says, when an older person dies, a library burns to the ground. We need to preserve *your* library.

*Fourth* and finally, spiritual includes finding a purpose and meaning in your life. Geriatricians will tell you that they see stunning revitalization in older people when newfound purpose comes along. One goal for you to consider in this area is to keep a gratitude journal, a thoughtful chronicling of the things you are grateful for. A gratitude journal is an instrument of self-awareness to help you savor what is going well in your life.

I recommend setting goals for yourself in each of those four dimensions—physical, social/emotional, mental, and spiritual. These goals should advance the values and vision in your personal mission statement.

Let’s do another survey question.

**SURVEY QUESTION #4:** Which dimension (physical, social/emotional, mental, and spiritual) do you feel is lacking most in your life? Which one do you think you need to work on the most? Please select one. (Discuss result.)

It’s important to set challenging goals for ourselves in those four areas of physical, social/emotional, mental, and spiritual. Psychologist Angela Duckworth, renowned for her work on grit, says that everyone should take on at least one challenging goal. Three that I’ve taken on are learning to juggle, draw, and play the piano.

I view goals as a flight plan. Imagine you’re flying a plane from Dulles to Los Angeles. You have a flight plan to follow. But the plane often gets off-track because you detour around storms, avoid turbulence, and get distracted. When that happens, you calmly bring the plane back to the flight plan, eventually landing safely in LA.

Your goals are like a flight plan, keeping you aware of your progress, and eventually landing you where you want to go. Just like a pilot, when you get off-course in your life or make a mistake, you review your goals and take steps to get your life back on track.

**QUESTIONS. Lisa, do we have any questions?**

We’ve talked about creating a vision for your life and capturing it in a personal mission statement, and then setting goals based on that vision. Now we’re going to focus on how to take action on those goals.

You want alignment between what matters to you, as described in your personal mission statement and goals, and the actions you take to pursue those goals.

In the winter of 1941, a 71-year-old Frenchman was heading into a disastrous old age. After risky surgery that left him with severe abdominal pains, he was languishing in a wheelchair. German troops overran his beloved France, and as the war years advanced, infections, pain, and anorexia ravaged his body. Old age left him disabled, decrepit, isolated, and uncertain about his future.

But something remarkable emerged from the fading old man in question. He was, I’m now going to reveal, the French artist Henri Matisse. He recovered from being half-dead and debilitated and went on in his 70s and 80s to revolutionize the art world.

He did it by taking action. Slowly at first, drawing on the wall next to his bed, but gradually doing more and more. Matisse himself said the secret to his astonishing resurrection was aging itself. He thought that age brought him courage and enhanced his creativity.

The geriatrician Dr. Marc Agronin, from whom I learned the Matisse story, argues that aging brings strength. He writes in his recent book *The End of Old Age*, “When we realize the truth of this message we can begin to end the tired and constricted notions of ‘old’ that we internalize through our lifetime and that serve to denigrate and limit our aging self and perpetuate an ageist culture.”

In terms of taking action, here are some ideas you may want to consider: Volunteer to get more involved in your village, take a college course online, and avoid getting sucked down addictive social media rabbit holes.

Let’s do another survey question.

**SURVEY QUESTION #5:** Is the pandemic having a negative impact on your mood and outlook? Please vote YES or NO. (Discuss results). For those of you who feel negatively impacted and for those who are doing okay, I hope the ideas we’ve discussed today help.

Let me summarize the main points I’ve made. I talked about creating an aspirational vision for your life and capturing that vision in a personal mission statement. I spoke of deriving goals from that vision, and then taking action on those goals. Vision, goals, and taking action are like the three legs of a stool. All three are needed to be happy and fulfilled when we’re older.

**QUESTIONS. Lisa, do we have any questions?**

Let me briefly and quickly describe the four handouts:

1. My personal mission statement and goals
2. Recommended reading,
3. 50 tips for success
4. My bio (for those interested)

I want to make an important disclaimer. My advice and guidelines for aging with dignity, vitality, and humor are ones that work for me, and they may work in whole or in part for you. But there are many ways to be happy and successful, and I don’t claim my path is the only path.

**Lisa, are there any final questions?**

Let me end by saying this:

Our ideas about aging are changing. Older people across America are using their later years to create new lives. They’re trying new careers, creating villages like this one, volunteering, going back to school, making new friends, and pursuing new interests.

People like Jane Goodall, Jane Fonda, Mick Jagger, Paul McCartney, Jimmy Carter, and Gloria Steinem are redefining what it means to be old.

I urge you to ask yourself what you care about and what matters most to you. I encourage you to spend more time on the relationships, causes, and goals you care deeply about.

Dr. Louise Aronson, a geriatric doctor, in her 2019 book, *Elderhood*, wrote, “We desperately want our elderhood to be long, meaningful, and satisfying, yet most of us refuse to approach it with the same shameless ambition we reflexively accord childhood and adulthood.”

I encourage you to be ambitious and to keep working on your personal mission statement and goals, so when you read them, they excite and inspire you.

As you do this, you are crafting and shaping yourself into an older person who is generous, wise, purposeful, and creative.

When I was a wildlife filmmaker and spent time around wolves, I came to recognize the beauty of this wolf credo by Del Goetz:

Respect the elders.

Teach the young.

Cooperate with the pack.

Play when you can.

Hunt when you must.

Rest in-between.

Share your affections.

Voice your feelings.

Leave your mark.

I hope you do well on your journey to “leave your mark” and to find meaning, purpose, and success as an older person.

Thank you for being here today and for participating.

Successful aging Zoom workshop