

## **Secular Chaplaincy Services**

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One crucial dimension of people's experience of aging is notably absent from the list of services in Orange County, and virtually everywhere else as well. It would make sense to add the provision of spiritual support to the Orange County roster of "Pioneers in Aging" programs.

You probably are thinking, "But that's a job for the churches."

I would respond that "spiritual" doesn't always reference religion. Rather than issues between the individual and God (which are critical for many, and properly the domain of faith communities), the spiritual dimension of aging to which I'm referring involves the opportunity to define what makes our life worthwhile: examining our moral stance about relationships, joy, family, community, and helping others, and deepening our authentic self-awareness. It also involves learning creative ways to experience aging so we can choose our philosophy of aging as well-informed individuals. Will we define aging only as loss, or will we, rather, celebrate and foster the new insights and opportunities that come only with aging? How do we experience and interpret the physical challenges of our aging bodies? How will we develop and express our legacy to the future? How will we, as we grow older, become more fully the inspiring humans we were always meant to be?

Such a program falls into the domain of chaplaincy, which is ideally offered as a non-denominational service addressing individuals right where they are; Chaplains don't tell people what to do or how to think or believe. Instead, chaplains are trained in the art of helping people uncover and share their deep down wisdom. Chaplains accompany and support people as they face life-altering challenges like serious illness, hospitalization, wartime military service, imprisonment, and death. Aging is an equally transformative experience, equally appropriate for spiritual support.

When people align with their own deep personal truth, their stress abates significantly. Anxiety decreases. Acceptance, joy, and contentment rise. Stress-relief repeatedly has been shown to improve mental and physical health, reduce use of medication and health services, and prolong active lifespan. Spiritual congruence answers the deepest quest universal to humans, helping people to identify for themselves the meaning of the present moment.

By providing a non-religious opportunity to learn and experience the spirituality of aging, Orange County can enhance quality of life in an important area that's presently overlooked. Such a program would mainly involve presenting seminars on specific aging topics and providing opportunities for one-on-one conversations with a chaplain. It can also include offering training opportunities for volunteer "community chaplaincy," and attention to senior center community-building through traditions and ceremonies. When religious questions came up, the secular chaplain would refer individuals to the appropriate faith community. Providing access to a part-time secular chaplain service would enhance the range and depth of aging services Orange County offers as part of its Senior Center programming.