

# OLDER AMERICANS: THE NEW NORMAL AVANT-GARDE

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## ABSTRACT

Many Americans have recently called into question the thesis that contentment is to be found in the affluent way of life and have instead embraced simplicity and “transcendental pursuits.” This article examines this trend among older, retired Americans and advances the argument that they provide a strong living example of the association between less income, communitarian culture, and happiness. In particular, it surveys the literature on the connection for senior citizens between contentment and interpersonal relationships, community involvement, and transcendental activities.

Millions of older Americans cease to be gainfully employed long before they are incapable of working. Many retire because the economy offers them no job opportunities; many others do so because they hope to spend their remaining years in pursuits other than labor. Both groups, with a few exceptions, adapt to lives with lower incomes than they would have enjoyed had they continued to work. These adaptations, which are the subject of this article, include cultivating relationships, becoming more involved in the community, and engaging in more transcendental pursuits.

The millions of others who have also recently experienced unexpectedly decreased income expectations and flows, as well as the many more who are likely to face the same if current assumptions about the future economy hold true, can learn much from these older Americans. The world is about to experience a second “digital revolution,” in which computers will come to perform most of the work previously done by members of the professional and managerial classes (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014). This marked transformation, unlike previous technical revolutions, is not expected to generate enough new jobs to replace those that it dissolves. Americans will experience far-reaching and persistent under- and unemployment (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014). Lessons gleaned from older Americans, many of whom have embraced the “new normal” of communitarian culture, will be valuable for all who come to experience this new economic reality.

## I. REACTIONS TO THE GREAT RECESSION

The Great Recession forced the majority of Americans to consume less. However, many responded by adapting in ways that entailed a less consumeristic life rather than one of deprivation. Thus, more than seven in ten reported in 2010 that they had bought less expensive brands (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014, p. 7). Three in ten cut back on alcohol or cigarettes. Fifty-seven percent (57%) either cut back or canceled vacation plans. Others opted to go to the hairdresser less often (38%) or cut down on dry cleaning (24%). One in five Americans cancelled or cut back cable television service. One in five Americans stopped purchasing coffee in the morning (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014). An August 2010 survey found that 44% of adults were going out to eat less often than they did six months previously, while only 8% were eating out more often (Jargon 2010).

In short, many Americans accommodated in part to the slower growth pathway by reducing their consumption of items they could do without, or consume less often, without suffering major deprivation. One should not overlook that at the same time other millions—who lost their home or could not find employment—suffered much more serious setbacks. The article focused on the part of the population, especially seniors, who have a sufficient stream of income to be able to meet their basic needs. That is have a secure roof over their head and are able to meet their caloric and health care needs, and other such essentials.

There were some signs that the Great Recession has led people to reexamine the thesis that contentment is to be found in an ever-rising standard of living and whether there is merit in pursuing other sources of contentment. An October-November 2009 survey found that nearly eight out of ten Americans (79%) worried that society has become too shallow (Euro RSCG Worldwide 2010, p. 20). Sixty percent (60%) worried that people have become too disconnected from the natural world (Euro RSCG Worldwide 2010, p. 24). Fifty-seven percent (57%) want to be part of a truly important cause (Euro RSCG Worldwide 2010, p. 31). Sixty-seven percent (67%) of Americans felt the recession had served to remind people of what's really important in life (Euro RSCG Worldwide 2010, p. 30). And 48% said they were actively trying to figure out what made them happy (Euro RSCG Worldwide 2010, p. 17).

Seventy-nine percent (79%) of Americans respected or admired people who lived simply (with minimal purchases, no debt, etc.), while only 15% felt the same way about people who had high-luxury lifestyles (Euro RSCG Worldwide 2010, p. 50). Seventy-eight percent (78%) said that most of us would be better off if we lived more simply (Euro RSCG Worldwide 2010, p. 47). Sixty-six percent (66%) said they no longer wanted a lot of bells and whistles on the products they purchased; they

would rather just have the functions they really needed (Euro RSCG Worldwide 2010, p. 47).

Polls however reveal that only a minority of the American population *aspire* to turn their recession-era behavior into the “new normal.” A 2009 poll found that only a third of Americans (32%) had spent less in recent months and intended to solidify this behavior as their “new, normal” pattern in the years ahead (Newport 2009). And, when asked by a 2010 Pew study to predict their financial behaviors once the economy recovers, only 31% planned to spend less, and 30% planned to borrow less (Pew Research Center 2010, p. 7–8).

One may expect that either the nations of the world would find a way back to a high growth pathway, leading to ever higher (and more widely-distributed) levels of affluence—or they will face an undemocratic future, with the majority of the people exhibiting intolerant attitudes and behavior on both the social and political level. However, one notes first of all, that the data show that even if one can ensure ever higher level of income and hence affluence—it buys ever less contentment (see next section). That is, even if the economy can find a way back to high growth—it may well not suffice to ensure social peace and above all human flourishing. Hence one turns to ask—either because we will be unable to grow fast or if we did, it will do ever less good: can other sources of contentment—ones not related to high and growing affluence—provide new sources of contentment and legitimacy?

## II. INCOME AND HAPPINESS: AN OVERVIEW

Data suggests that, once a certain level of income is attained, additional income (and hence the capacity to spend and consume) creates little additional contentment. Social science findings, which do not all run in the same direction and have other well-known limitations, on the whole seem to lend support to the notion that higher income does not significantly raise people’s contentment—with the important exception of the poor. Frank M. Andrews and Stephen B. Withey found that one’s socio-economic status had meager effects on one’s “sense of well-being” and no significant effect on “satisfaction with life-as-a-whole” (1976). Over 1,000 participants rated their sense of satisfaction and happiness on a 7-point scale and a 3-point scale. There was no correlation between socioeconomic status and happiness; in fact, the second-highest socioeconomic group was consistently among the least happy of all seven brackets measured. And Jonathan Freedman discovered that levels of reported happiness did not vary greatly among the members of different economic classes, with the exception of the very poor who tended to be less happy than others (Freedman 1978).

Additional evidence suggests that economic growth does not significantly affect happiness (though at any given time the people of poor countries are generally less happy than those of wealthy ones). David G. Myers and Ed Diener reported that while per-capita disposable (after-tax) income in inflation-adjusted dollars almost exactly doubled between 1960 and 1990, almost the same proportion of Americans reported that they were “very happy” in 1993 (32%) as they did in 1957 (35%) (1995). Although economic growth has slowed since the mid-1970s, Americans reported happiness has been remarkably stable (nearly always between 30 and 35%) across both high-growth and low-growth periods (Myers and Diener 1995). Moreover, in the same period (1960–1990), rates of depression, violent crime, divorce, and teen suicide have all risen dramatically (Myers and Diener 1995).

In a 1974 study (Easterlin 1974), Richard Easterlin reported on a phenomenon that has since been labeled the “Easterlin paradox:” although at a given point in time, higher income generates more happiness, over the longer run (10 years or more), happiness does not increase as a country’s income increases. In other words, a country’s long-term economic growth does not improve the overall happiness of its citizens. Japan is an often-cited example of Easterlin’s paradox. Between 1962 and 1987, Japan’s economy grew at an unprecedented rate, more than tripling its GNP per capita. Yet Japan’s overall happiness remained constant over that period (Easterlin 2005). In 1970, Americans’ average income could buy over 60% more than it could in the 1940s, yet the average happiness had not increased (Easterlin 1973). And a survey of those whose income increased over a 10-year period revealed that these individuals were no happier than those whose incomes had stagnated (Myer and Diener 1996).

Interest in the Easterlin paradox was revived in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the publication of a number of scholarly articles that called Easterlin’s findings into question. Veenhoven and Hagerty found that both happiness and income increased in second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, indicating a correlation between the two (Myer and Diener 1996). A 2008 paper by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers similarly found a correlation between income growth and happiness (Stevenson and Wolfers 2008). In 2010, Easterlin and his associates published a response to these challenges (Easterlin et al. 2010). They showed that much of the data from Stevenson and Wolfers’ paper focused on a short period (6 years instead of 10) and argued that the trends from their longer-term data were attributable to factors other than economic growth. They also included data from a number of developing countries where they found renewed support for the Easterlin paradox. China’s growth rate implies a doubling of per capita income in less than 10 years; South Korea’s in 13; and Chile’s in 18 years. Yet none of these countries have

shown a statistically significant increase in happiness (Easterlin et al. 2010, p. 22467).

There is one important exception to these findings, namely, when the income of poor people is increased, it does contribute significantly to their happiness. This is important because otherwise the data cited could be used to argue that seeking to improve the lot of the poor is pointless because it would not contribute to their happiness (Layard 2005, pp. 32–35).

A later study came up with a cut-off point for the correlations between individual income and happiness. A 2010 study identified the level of income after which additional income produces little additional happiness as \$75,000 (Kahneman and Deaton 2010). The study's authors found that high income improved individuals' life evaluation but not their emotional well-being, defined as "the frequency and intensity of experiences of joy, stress, sadness, anger, and affection that make one's life pleasant or unpleasant" (Kahneman and Deaton 2010, p. 16489).

In short, although the data do not all point in one direction, the preponderance of the evidence suggest that high levels of income do not buy much happiness. Can people find contentment in other pursuits than seeking ever higher level of income—and consumption?

### III. MASLOW'S "EXIT"

Abraham Maslow's "A Theory of Human Motivation," though published in 1943, speaks directly to the question of sources of contentment for those whose basic material needs are sated. Maslow argued that humans have a hierarchy of needs. At the bottom are basic human necessities; once these are sated, affection and self-esteem are next in line, and, finally, we can reach the pinnacle of human satisfaction by attending to what he calls "self-actualization." It follows that as long as the acquisition and consumption of goods satisfies basic creature comforts—safety, shelter, food, clothing, health care, and education—then rising wealth is contributing to genuine human contentment. However, once consumption is used to satisfy the higher needs, it turns into consumerism—and consumerism becomes a social disease.

In historical terms, the turning point came—for Americans with income well above the poverty line—in the decades that followed WWII. Around the time of WWII, economists held that people have fixed needs and that once these were satisfied, people wouldn't consume more; they would save whatever additional income they earned. During the war, however, economists noted that the American productive capacity had greatly expanded. They feared that with the end of the war, the idling of the assembly lines that produced thousands of tanks, planes, and many

other war-related materials would lead to massive unemployment (in effect, a return to the kind of depression that the U.S. faced just before WWII)—because there was nothing that the assembly lines could produce that people needed, given that their fixed, peacetime needs were sated.

This conventional wisdom, however, was soon to change when Vance Packard's *The Status Seekers* called attention to the purveyors of large scale advertising, the producers of artificial, unbounded wants (Packard and Abbott 1963). In the decades that followed WWII, industrial corporations discovered that they could “manufacture” artificial needs for whatever products they were marketing. For instance, first women and then men were taught that they smelled bad and needed to purchase deodorants. Men, who used to wear white shirts and grey flannel suits, learned that they ‘had to’ purchase a variety of shirts and suits, and that last year’s wear was not proper in the year that followed. Soon, it was not just suits but also cars, ties, handbags, sunglasses, watches, and numerous other products that had to be constantly replaced to keep up with the latest trends. Most recently people have been convinced that they have various illnesses (such as restless leg syndrome) that require the purchase of medications.

#### **IV. SENIOR CITIZENS EMBRACE COMMUNITARIAN CULTURE**

This article next considers three categories of pursuits; together, they comprise a “communitarian culture” because they all involve forming community ties, strengthening social norms, and shoring up forums for public discussion in service of the common good. For each of these categories, retired older Americans provide a living example of the association between less income, communitarian culture, and happiness.

##### **A. Mutuality and Bonds of Affinity and Subjective Well-Being**

Many social scientists agree that maintaining lasting, mutual, emotional relationships makes people happier. Scholarly work on the subject generally divides interpersonal relationships and bonds of affinity into three categories: family (“kin”), neighbors, and friends (Litwak and Szelenyi 1969). The presence of satisfying interpersonal relationships in an individual’s life is “[o]ne of the most consistent predictors of [subjective well-being]” (Siedlecki et al. 2014, p. 562) and “several researchers have concluded that human relationships and connections of all kinds contribute more to happiness than anything else” (Bok 2010, p.

19). There seem to be two components to this phenomenon: density and quality of relationships. Network theory postulates that social density—that is, the number of interpersonal interactions an individual experiences—strongly relates to subjective well-being; this hypothesis has been repeatedly empirically verified, although the effect varies by societal context (Requena 1995, pp. 271, 279). Studies also show that having especially close, intimate friendships increases subjective well-being—the quality of one’s relationships also matters (Requena 1995, p. 279). Scholars theorize that relationships impact subjective well-being through instrumental and expressive channels; that is, quality relationships are a source of both tangible support and of less measurable mutual enrichment that can be achieved with very little expenditure or material cost. Especially important to the quality of relationships is mutuality on both instrumental and expressive channels. Tangible kinship reciprocity has been shown to foster trust and “structure well-being” in entire societies (Tsai and Dzorgbo 2012). Less tangibly, receiving “autonomy support ... [defined as] one relational partner acknowledging the other’s perspective, providing choice, encouraging self-initiation, and being responsive” (Deci et al. 2006, p. 313) has been linked to enhanced well-being among friends—but *giving* autonomy support was even more important. “Psychological well-being ... appears to be more strongly related to being able to give autonomy support to a close friend than to getting autonomy support” (Deci et al. 2006, p. 325). And another study found that giving instrumental or emotional support to others reduced the risk of mortality for older adults (Brown et al. 2003, pp. 324–325). In short, having a number of close relationships that are characterized by mutual enrichment is an empirically-proven major source of happiness.

These general findings apply in particular to older Americans. Studies find that informal interpersonal contact is the strongest predictor of life satisfaction among the elderly (Edwards and Klemmack 1973, p. 110), and some research has suggested that “supportive social networks are especially important” for older people (Baldassare et al. 1984, p. 550). Kin relationships are one important indicator of happiness; living with a spouse has been shown to lead to better physical and mental health compared to living alone (Matthews 1986), and studies show that married status has a strongly positive effect on the subjective well-being of retirees (Requena 2010, p. 523). More generally, marriage correlates with higher subjective well-being because marriage often leads to intimacy and social support (Diener et al. 1999, pp. 290–291), and married individuals also report higher physical and mental health on average (Green and Elliott 2010, p. 152). However, despite the fact that “parenthood is at the top of most parents’ identity salience hierarchies” (Rogers and White 1998, p. 293), surveys of the literature note the

apparently-baffling fact that a wide body of research has found little to no significant relationship between the frequency with which older adults interact with their adult children or siblings and the older adults' happiness, and other studies have found "one's parental status has virtually no effect upon measures of global happiness" (Seccombe 1987; Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1987). Some social scientists have suggested that "kinship-based relations in general, regardless of whether they are intra- or intergenerational, do not affect morale because of the absence of or restrictions upon mutual choice in the establishment and maintenance of these relationships" (Lee and Kuntz 1987, p. 460). This would explain why marriage has a significant positive impact on older Americans' well-being, while other kin relationships of "blood" do not.

Beyond kin, regular connection with a network of friends has been found to be particularly significant for life satisfaction among the elderly. In fact, a wealth of studies has demonstrated that involvement with friends is "more consistently related to psychological well-being" among the elderly than is involvement with family or neighbors (Jones and Vaughan 1900, p. 451). Other studies have found that friendship can mitigate the challenges of disability, loneliness, and emotional vulnerability among the elderly by providing companionship, social support, and feelings of usefulness (Martina and Stevens 2006, p. 468). Friendships can also provide additional intimacy, instrumental support, positive feelings, and opportunities for socializing to the elderly (Jones and Vaughan 1990, p. 451). Social integration with a network of friends may also decrease stress and improve health by increasing social support and trust (van der Horst and Coffé 2012, p. 510). One study of elderly Black Americans' consistent life satisfaction concluded that it was "due, at least in part, to greater contact with church-related friends among the black elderly" (Ortega, Crutchfield, and Rushing 1983, p. 110). And another study found that up to 20% of the variation in loneliness among older adults can be explained with only four factors—of which friendship interaction is one of the strongest (Lee and Ishii-Kuntz 1987, p. 472).

Older Americans are becoming a model for the "new normal" communitarian culture. A 2007 Bureau of Labor Statistics study of how older Americans spend their time found that men ages 55–59 spent on average 0.6 hours a day socializing and communicating, while those ages 60 and older spent 0.7 hours; women ages 55–59 spent .8 hours, those ages 60–64 spent 0.7 hours, and those ages 65 and older spent 0.8 hours (Krantz-Kent and Stewart 2007, p. 11). CBS reported on July 28, 2014, that an increasing number of older Americans are moving in together due to material constraints, thereby cultivating the kind of friendships that lead to heightened well-being (CBS News 2014). In fact, cohabitation among people ages 50 and older rose from 1.2 million people in 2000 to 3.3 million in 2013, in the United States (Wargo 2014). One individual



interviewed by CBS stated, “I think we [roommates] feel probably closer to each other than we do to a lot of other people in our lives” (CBS 2014). Another added, “It adds a richness that I cannot even describe” (CBS 2014). Moreover, according to a 2009 Pew survey, about seven in ten Americans ages 65 and older “say they are enjoying more time with their family” due to their age, and 28 and 25 percent of them *most* value about growing older the opportunity to spend more time with family and grandchildren, respectively (Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends 2009).

### B. Community Involvement and Well-Being

The second component of the “new normal” communitarian culture, community involvement, has also been shown to correlate strongly with increased contentment and well-being. In fact, “some researchers have found that merely attending monthly club meetings or volunteering once a month is associated with a change in well-being equivalent to a doubling of income” (Bok 2010, p. 20). Data show that formal community involvement may benefit most the most vulnerable older Americans; one survey of New England elders found that “the strongest and most consistent predictor of life satisfaction for disadvantaged elders was participation” in a volunteer group (Fengler 1984, p. 189). “Community involvement,” for the purposes of this article, includes conducting volunteer work, mentoring others, and participating in politics for reasons that are not explicitly *social*; all of these activities have been shown to contribute to well-being in the general population and for older Americans.

First, volunteer activities are related to increased well-being. According to one study, “volunteering enhances happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and sense of control over life” (Thoits and Hewitt 2001). Another study found that volunteerism likely caused increases to two separate facets of well-being: eudemonic well-being, or the “mental state of self-realization [that occurs] ‘when people’s life activities are most congruent or meshing with deeply held values and are holistically or fully engaged’”; and social well-being, or well-being in one’s relationship to the community (Son and Wilson 2012, pp. 662, 673). [It did not have a significant causal impact on hedonic well-being, or the “mental state of being happy or experiencing pleasure,” although higher hedonic well-being *did* seem to select for subsequent volunteer status (Son and Wilson 2012, pp. 662, 673)].

These benefits are true for older Americans as well. One foundational study found that retirees older than 65 who volunteered regularly had higher life satisfaction and “fewer symptoms of depression [and] anxiety,” while a host of other studies found relationships between

volunteerism and happiness and enhanced well-being (Hunter and Linn 1980–1981, p. 68). A 2010 study found that volunteers ages 50 and older reported better mental health, productivity, and “an overall sense that their life had improved” (Wong 2010).

Also, older Americans form a major subset of the volunteering population in the United States. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 25 percent of the United States population ages 16 and older perform volunteer work (Son and Wilson 2012, p. 658), compared to 26 percent of individuals ages 55 to 64 and 24.1 percent of individuals ages 65 and older (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014). Experience Corps estimates that the BLS’ numbers are too low; they estimate that almost half of individuals ages 55 and older volunteer, and that among individuals older than 75 years the number is 43 percent (Fact Sheet on Aging in America). And older Americans donate *more* time than other volunteers; individuals ages 65 and older volunteered 96 hours annually compared to the American average of 52 volunteer hours (Fact Sheet on Aging in America). Moreover, older Americans are volunteering at increasing rates; the Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging found that the number of volunteers ages 65 and older increased from 7.7 million in 2002 to 9.1 million in 2009 (Administration on Aging), and a Canadian study found that even when senior citizens have a lower volunteer rate than other demographics they “contribute, on average, more hours per year”—more than 1 billion hours in 2010 (Cook and Sladowski 2013). In other words, older Americans are “leading the charge” into a communitarian culture that values volunteerism over material goods.

Second, older Americans often participate in mentorship and sponsorship programs, which are also connected to well-being and fulfillment. One news report speaks to the benefits of such programs for both senior citizens and youth, writing that they “increase a senior’s sense of purpose” and enable the “transfer [of] their knowledge, skills, and values to the next generation” (Today 2004). One study of inter-generational programs (IGPs) found that they consistently improve the emotional well-being and happiness of senior citizens in Taiwan (Hsu et al. 2014). Another study of senior citizens who worked with or sponsored recent refugees—by teaching them to use public transit, helping them learn English, answering questions, and generally showing them how to adapt to life in the United States—noted that the volunteers often participated because it fulfilled their sense of themselves as caring and moral individuals (Erickson 2012). Senior citizens might also develop mentorship relationships with prison inmates or other underserved populations, to obvious societal benefit. Others might sponsor service members in letter writing campaigns to boost troop morale (Shaw 2014). Unfortunately, there seems to be very little statistical data

available on the participation of older Americans in such mentorship programs, but anecdotally one finds many examples of such participation.

Finally, political participation contributes to well-being. Robert Putnam famously suggests that political engagement revitalizes civic society as a whole; given the apparent relationship between the density of social relationships and well-being, this seems to suggest that political participation has an indirect effect on well-being for all. However, the benefits of political participation for well-being are also demonstrably direct. A recent summary of the literature on political participation and life satisfaction found some scholars have demonstrated that the latter may stem from the former, although there is also competing evidence that suggests the line of causality may run in the opposite direction (Lorenzini 2014, p. 3). One survey of the relationship between participation and happiness notes that participation need not be limited to voting; instead, it may extend to “election campaigning ... canvassing door-to-door, holding public meetings, raising money and stimulating media coverage ... influencing politicians, writing letters, lobbying, and organising protests” (Barker and Martin 2011, p. 8). It found a body of empirical evidence that suggests political participation is correlated with subjective well-being, as well as evidence that merely being offered the opportunity for political participation increased happiness (Barker and Martin 2011, p. 9). A link has been established between adolescents’ engagement in political activities and contributions to society and positive experiences (Magen 1996). This result is confirmed by a study that spanned 20 European countries and found that actual political participation significantly contributes to life satisfaction (Pacheco and Lange 2010). Other macro studies that have examined the relationship between (non-compulsory) voting and overall national happiness have found that the two are correlated (Owen, Videras, and Willemsen 2008). Even simple *membership* in an association reduces psychological distress (Sanders 2001, p. 4), one major source of erosion of well-being. Although there seem to be no studies specifically of the relationship between political participation and life satisfaction among older or retired Americans, this body of evidence suggests that the relationship would be the same.

Elderly Americans vote with greater regularity than any other American demographic group (Brandon 2012). Some older Americans maintain membership in lobbying organizations such as the Gray Panthers, the National Council of Senior Citizens, and the AARP, with which it is politically wise for policymakers to be “in touch.” One scholar suggests that these organizations help senior citizens participate representatively by giving seniors, by proxy, “easy informal access to public officials ... public platforms in the national media ... [and the ability to] initiate and frame issues for public debate” (Binstock 1991). Extra leisure time enables older Americans to show up to town hall

meetings to speak directly with policymakers; the National Council on Aging even provides a “toolkit” to help senior citizens do so! (National Council on Aging). And the Center for Responsive Politics found that interest groups classified as advocating for retired individuals were the second biggest contributors to Congressional representatives in 2014 (Center for Responsive Politics 2014). Since the 1970s, non-electoral political participation has become more frequent among Americans (Copeland 2013, p. 258); because acts, such as petition signing, often do not require leaving one’s home, their increased relevance may open up many new avenues for political participation to older Americans who experience limited mobility. In short, there are many opportunities for older Americans to participate directly in politics, as well as many avenues for them to feel represented—both of which, it has been shown, are related to increased life satisfaction. They thus may be considered the “vanguard” of this second plank of the “new normal” communitarian culture.

### C. Transcendental Activities and Well-Being

Extensive evidence also supports the conclusion that transcendental activities, including religious attendance or beliefs and other spiritual or ontological contemplation, are linked to higher levels of well-being and contentment. Scholarly study of this topic has a long pedigree; the first works date back a full century (Abdel-Khalek 2006, p. 88). An overview of leading research on happiness noted that “more than 1,000 scholarly articles were published in academic journals between 2000 and 2002 on the relationship between religion and mental health” (Paquette 2006, p. 1). These studies have shown that there is a strong relationship between religious attitudes and rituals and subjective well-being or happiness (Sahraian et al. 2013, p. 451), and a seminal study of methods of increasing one’s happiness listed “practicing religion and spirituality” as one that is solidly empirically-verified (Lyubomirsky 2007). A comparative study that considered individuals from the United States, Denmark, and the Netherlands found that religiousness had a positive and significant impact on happiness only in the United States (Snoep 2008, pp. 209–210). To sum up the literature on moderate or liberal religiosity by quoting a recent article, “various aspects of religious behaviour such as involvement in religious services and strength of religious affiliation are positively associated with subjective well-being,” generally speaking (Kortt, Doller, and Grant 2014).

One study that asked respondents to rank the reasons for their long-term happiness found that religious affiliation, belief in a “higher power,” and engaging in spiritual activities were “moderately represented” in the listed reasons (Caunt et al. 2013, p. 478). Another

study found that religious affiliation was significantly correlated with both absolute subjective well-being and relative subjective well-being among Ghanaians in 2008 (Pokimica, Addai, and Takyi 2012). An analysis of undergraduate Muslim students found a “significant correlation between religiosity and happiness” (Sahraian et al. 2013, p. 451). Another study of “happiness inducing behaviors” found that the correlation between religious and spiritual behaviors and increased happiness was weaker than any other happiness inducing behavior—but still noteworthy (Warner and Vroman 2011, p. 1069).

Nor does the transcendental activity need to be explicitly religiously affiliated. Studies have shown that simple acts of meditation and cultivating mindfulness, gratitude, and forgiveness were all significantly associated with increased subjective well-being (Caunt et al. 2013, p. 478). Even self-identified mindfulness—which differs from other cognitive states and can be defined as an inward-focused “state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present”—has been empirically shown to correlate with “more autonomous activity in day-to-day life and lower levels of unpleasant affect” as well as with “higher levels of autonomy, more intense and frequent pleasant affect, and less intense and less frequent unpleasant affect” (Brown and Ryan 2003, pp. 822–823, 839). Moreover, “a converging body of literature” has found that cultivating compassion and feelings of kindness for others through meditation, visualization, and acts leads to higher frequency of positive moods and brings about higher well-being (Mongrai, China, and Shapira 2011, pp. 964–965). And engaging in compassionate action for even five or fifteen minutes—by “talking to a homeless person” or even “simply being more loving to those around you”—is empirically linked to significantly higher self-reported self-esteem and subjective happiness (Mongrai, China, and Shapira 2011, pp. 977).

As is true of the cultivation of mutual relationships and community involvement, older Americans are leading the movement toward a “new normal” communitarian culture on the axis of religious and transcendental activities. A Gallup poll from 2010 found that older Americans ages 65 and up were the demographic fourth most likely to report “frequent” church attendance, coming in after Conservatives, non-Hispanic Black Americans, and Republicans (Newport 2010). According to one journal for health care professionals, 96 percent of elderly Americans believe in a higher power of some kind, and more than half of them attend services at least once a week (Kaplan and Berkman 2013). Members of the “G.I. Generation”—those Americans ages 74 and older—use the Internet to access information related to religion—as opposed to other uses—more than any other demographic of Americans, according to a Pew Research poll (Pew Research Internet Project 2010), and adults ages 50 and older were more likely to be religiously affiliated

than any other American age demographic (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project 2010). A separate Pew poll found that members of the Greatest generation were less likely to be unaffiliated with a religion than members of the Silent generation, who in turn were less likely to be unaffiliated than Boomers; Gen X'ers and Millennials were even more likely to be unaffiliated than the Boomers (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project 2012). Another study found that older Americans are more likely than other demographics to "attend church, engage in prayer, and derive greater life satisfaction through their religion" (Green Elliott 2010, p. 151). Other scholarly work has found that although church attendance among the oldest Americans decreases with age, likely due to mobility constraints and health concerns, "internalized religious attitudes and feelings apparently increase among persons who acknowledge having a religion," as do "non-organizational [religious] activities" such as "prayer alone or within the family, mass media religious broadcasts, sacred music, and using religion to help one understand one's situation in life."<sup>1</sup> [On the other hand, older Americans were actually less likely to engage in certain activities that one could classify as transcendental, such as yoga, the belief in spiritual energy present in physical objects, reincarnation, and so on, and they were also less likely to report having had a "religious or spiritual experience" (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project 2009)].

Religious affiliation and other transcendental activities have been found to be especially influential on the happiness of older adults, although literature on the topic remains relatively sparse (Afolabi and Aina 2014, p. 181). One literature review notes that several studies have shown that religiosity and religious behavior become more important to individuals as they age and that "religious activities and attitudes enable coping behaviors especially among older [members of the] population" (Afolabi and Aina 2014, p. 181). Another comprehensive overview of the literature on the subject notes that at least six studies found that religiosity was particularly linked to psychological well-being among individuals who were older than 60, 70, 75, 80, and so on years of age (Harris 2001, p. 19). One small study of hospice patients and healthy older adults found that intrinsic religiosity was indirectly correlated with enhanced subjective well-being (Ardelt and Koenig 2006). Another small study of adults between ages 60 and 89 found that higher scores on a spiritual perspective scale were positively and significantly correlated with higher hope and higher well-being (Davis 2005). Elderly Thai adults' sense of contentedness and of "feeling satisfied with what one has," which correlated strongly with happiness, was found in a series of focus group discussions to have been likely influenced by the internalization of Thai Buddhist philosophy—"passed on automatically at birth" (Gray et al. 2008, p. 222). And cross-cultural studies of religiosity

and well-being have found that the two variables are more significantly positively correlated among people who experience higher levels of objective difficulty such as decreased life expectancy or lack of access to resources and income (Lun and Bond 2013, p. 304); it is not much of a stretch to assume that older Americans, who by definition have fewer years to live and who often have lower income and fewer resources, experience similarly elevated benefits of religiosity.

## V. IN GENERAL

In closing, a look beyond the specific well-being benefits older Americans are reaping from particular non-economic, non-consumption based, communitarian activities. Studies, that encompassed 30 years of information about Americans' well-being, find that older Americans are more content than younger ones (Simring 2013). Moreover, the data show that discrepancies between older Americans and other adults with regard to happiness reflect generation-wide life experiences rather than a tendency to become less happy with age (Szalavitz 2013). Other studies find that the emotional health of older Americans is significantly better than that of other American demographics. For instance, a 2011 Gallup poll found that the percentage of Americans whose emotional health index is greater than 90 stays relatively steady between the ages of 18 and 59, never fluctuating more than three percentage points—but at age 60, the percentage jumps 5 percentage points and keeps climbing until age 79, at which point it decreases again but never falls more than 6 percentage points from the peak (Rheault and McGeeney 2011). As an *Economist* article quips, “Although as people move towards old age they lose things they treasure—vitality, mental sharpness and looks—they also gain what people spend their lives pursuing: happiness” (The Economist 2010).

## NOTES

1. The authors here cited referenced several studies in making this assessment. It must be here noted that the first of these studies had serious methodological errors; however, Holt and Dellmann-Jenkins found that the methodologically-flawed study's results were borne out by other, more methodologically-sound studies (Holt and Dellmann-Jenkins 1992, pp. 102–103).

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