

CAREGIVERS, FAMILY MEMBERS CAN BENEFIT FROM GERIATRIC SPECIALIST
How to become a creative healing companion focus of OUSD sponsored event

By Joan Englander

Music, story, poetry, gentle body movement, and prayer are avenues that awaken joy in the heart and peace to the soul. Geriatric specialist Joan Englander gives a workshop entitled "Creating Joy in the Evening of Life, The New Way of Eldercare." The workshop focuses on becoming a creative healing companion for older parents, clients and friends in need of physical care.

For 28 years, Englander has facilitated group discussions in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and retirement centers, sponsored by the Ojai Unified School District and formerly by Santa Barbara City College Adaptive Programs. She also has a private practice, offers in-service training, and sings, tells stories, reads poetry and prays at the bedsides of those in need of care. Her innovative techniques, teachings, and stories are described in her forthcoming book, "Joy in the Evening of Our Lives."

Elders who require physical care may appear to be weak, incoherent, confused; they may hallucinate or grapple with severe memory loss. Some are in acute physical or emotional pain; others remain mentally alert, and are just simply old.

As the medical world increases our life span, we need to increase a new and expanded way of life for our elders, one that enhances spiritual and emotional well-being, and brings joy and peace of mind into the evening of their lives.

To prepare for responding to the needs of elders, the following journey through an elder's mind gives us a glimpse into the aging process, helps us increase our understanding, and prepares us to take creative action: "The most wonderful thing about being old is that I'm alive until I am dead! Even if I can't talk or respond very much, even if my words blur and slur or I seem to be unable to understand hardly anything at all—I am still alive. I am still me on the inside. Talk to me, hold my hand, bring me new life—something passionate and challenging, and for God's sake, act as if I am perfectly fine! Please don't act as if I belong in my grave! Don't bury me yet! Because somewhere deep inside, I am really OK.

"The fact is, it's also possible that I'm just old and nothing much is wrong. My emotions are OK and my body isn't that bad. I can't help it if I can't remember who you are (even if you are my grandson or granddaughter) or that I get things mixed up. But

this doesn't mean I can't think, reflect or contemplate. My spirit has all kinds of things to say. Put on your listening heart, and be prepared for a surprise. I tell you, I'm not dead yet!"

As givers of companionship and care, we have the opportunity to open doors to joyful horizons awakened through the creative process, spiritual dialogue and spontaneous expression. These avenues connect to the wellness within elders and within ourselves. When we make this connection, we are energized by the creative process, and are able to help elders experience inner wellness, whether they suffer physically and emotionally, or are relatively healthy and mentally alert.

Englander shows how the creative process helps heal, how all of us can become creative healing companions, and how, by sharing in an elder's last years, we experience the gift of the human spirit.

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