

Sages of Aging: A future perspective

by Jim Firman, EdD, MBA



Leaders in the fields of aging and longevity have striven for decades to transform the aging experience through research, policy and practice. Ken Dychtwald, PhD, founder and CEO of the consultancy Age Wave, is a prolific writer, speaker, thought leader and provocateur about the grand opportunities and challenges of an

aging society. Elyse Pellman, Age Wave president, has collaborated with him on many publications. Their most recent book, *Sages of Aging: A Guide for Changemakers*, offers life and leadership guidance for today's and future leaders in the fields of aging and longevity.

The book presents a compilation of "legacy interviews" that Dychtwald conducted with 12 of the most influential pioneers in the fields of aging, identified in collaboration with the American Society on Aging. Each interview covers topics ranging from individual origin stories and personal philosophies about aging well, to prescriptions for a better society and advice for seasoned professionals and younger people on being changemakers.



There are several reasons why I consider *Sages of Aging* a brilliant contribution to the fields of aging and longevity:

- An idealized role for older adults is to pass on their wisdom and insights to future generations. In this book, 12 luminaries share what motivated them to enter the field, as well as their thinking and ideas with the rest of us. Their passion, intelligence and commitment to helping others are inspirational.
- Significantly, the book's systematic and structured interview process made it easy to compile the treasure trove of collective wisdom contained in the sidebar "How to be a changemaker." Soon, emerging technologies will make it possible to apply this approach to many topics.
- *Sages of Aging* is a "must-read" for people of all ages who are serious about having a major social impact in the field of aging or longevity. As a 72-year-old social entrepreneur who has big dreams, I benefit daily from the collective wisdom and advice of these great leaders.

On a personal level, although I have known many of the interviewees in a professional context over my 45 years in the aging field, it was a real treat to learn so much more about their life stories and experiences and how these shaped them as individuals.

I hope that *Sages of Aging* and this compendium will inspire changemakers of all ages to embrace the challenges, seize the opportunities and pick up the mantle of leadership to advance aging and longevity into the future.

James Firman, EdD, MBA, led the National Council on Aging (NCOA) as president and CEO from 1995 to 2020. In April 2020, Firman's passion for innovation and greater social impact led him to "graduate" from NCOA and to found BetterAge, a social enterprise harnessing emerging technologies to help people across the world age well. Learn more about BetterAge at <https://betterage.net/>

How to be a changemaker: Advice from 12 Sages of Aging



Fernando Torres-Gil, PhD, MSW
–first US Secretary on Aging; Director, UCLA Luskin Center for Policy Research on Aging:

- Take the road less traveled.
- Listen to older people and take their advice seriously.
- Plan your life as if you will live to be 100, and then, of course, enjoy every moment, every year.



Terry Fulmer, PhD, RN, FAAN
–President and CEO, The John A. Hartford Foundation; founding Dean, New York University College of Nursing:

- Follow your passion, stay tenacious and use your networks.
- Think out loud with immediate colleagues so you consistently and constantly hear informative feedback.
- Be a good listener.
- Realize leadership includes making tough choices.



Jeanette Takamura, PhD–Professor and Dean Emerita, Columbia University School of Social Work; former US Assistant Secretary on Aging:

- Be very clear about who you are and what you want to accomplish.
- Learn everything you can, absorb everything you can, test your ideas, remain in conversation, and don't step away, don't give up.



Paul Nathanson, JD
–Founder, American Bar Association Commission on Law and Aging; former National Secretary, Gray Panthers:

- Avoid being too serious about yourself.
- Be confident in yourself, enough to hire people smarter than you.
- Acknowledge your mistakes. If you make one, say “I made a mistake.”
- Don't worry about who gets the credit and you will get a lot done.



Jennie Chin Hansen, RN, MS, FAAN
–former CEO, American Geriatrics Society; former President, AARP:

- Understand history and context.
- Combine the fire in your belly with understanding and listening, as well as creating and innovating.



E. Percil Stanford, PhD
–Professor and Director Emeritus, San Diego State University; founder, National Institute on Minority Aging:

- Identify the issue, identify the problems, and help provide a pathway to solving those problems.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions. Formulate your question, and ask it, no matter who it is. If you don't ask, you'll never get an answer and you'll always wonder.



Marc Freedman, MBA
–CEO and President, Encore.org [now CoGenerate]; Co-founder, Experience Corps and The Purpose Prize:

- Recognize moments when you see a truth or a failure in society, in the market, and be fluid enough and opportunistic enough to move in that direction.
- Understand that generativity, love and work, a focus on the future and a chance to connect with other generations are the key ingredients, not only for us as individuals but for us as aging societies.



Kathy Greenlee, JD
–former US Assistant Secretary on Aging; current Chair, National Council on Aging:

- Speak up! Your role at this table is welcome and your opinion matters. It may be different than mine, but it's just as valid.
- Don't be afraid. We need young people in the field, and we need them to be the next generation of leaders.



Imani Woody, PhD, MHS
–President and CEO, Mary's House for Older Adults; advocate for women, people of color and LGTB issues:

- Get one or several mentors. If you need to know something, find someone who has that information. I have never gone to someone, asked a question or asked if they would be my mentor, and had them say no.
- Be authentic. Don't wait to be an old person to be authentic.



Linda Fried, MD, PhD
–Dean, Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health; former President, Association of American Physicians:

- Go for it. Our world is one of constant changes. Your job is to recognize where the change is going and get it to a better place.
- Realize that unless we're leading the change, we're going backward.



John Rowe, MD
–founding Director, Division on Aging, Harvard Medical School:

- Do research and master the information to become an expert in aging. First, get credibility in the field and then make sure you ask important questions.
- Carve out an area broad enough to do different kinds of projects, but narrow enough that the accumulated evidence you are developing has a theme.



Larry Curley, MPA
–Executive Director, National Indian Council on Aging; former Division of Health Director, Navajo Nation:

- Find something you believe in. Look at what has been done in the field of aging and say, “I can make a difference.” That commitment, that passion, that fire in the belly can keep you going for years.