



Conversation with Gene Cohen of the Center on Aging, Health & Humanities and Gay Hanna of the National Center for Creative Aging

Gene Cohen, M.D., Ph.D., is Director of the Center on Aging, Health & Humanities at The George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

Gay Hanna, Ph.D., M.F.A., is Executive Director of the National Center for Creative Aging, Washington, D.C.

MoMA: Dr. Cohen, why don't you begin by talking a bit about your research into memory and the imagination.

Gene Cohen: We're born with no memories, but we're immediately responding to things that are stirring our imagination. Similarly, when memory is going, the capacity for imagination is still there, so even in the absence of understanding something from the perspective of specific memories — concrete facts — the imagination helps people enjoy what they're looking at. When we enter middle age the two hemispheres of our brain begin to work more closely together. Prior to that, we used them both, but depending on the task, we would use left-brain more for some activities, and right for others. It's not the same as what people sort of narrowly saw as right-brain versus left-brain people. It's not at all that simple. Everybody uses both sides, but in middle age they begin to use both sides of the brain together. I've described it as moving to all-wheel drive. I've also suggested that any activity that uses

both sides of the brain optimally is, in effect, savored by the brain. It's like chocolate to the brain. It's like you have a new capacity or skill. One of the things that people don't realize that's also going on here is that with the dementia people still have their imagination. Especially if they're beyond mid-stage or early dementia there's still a lot of capacity; in mid-stage, where there's a lot of impairment, the imagination is stronger than the memory.

MoMA: What can arts programs offer people with dementia and their caregivers?

Gay Hanna: The power of art to engage is clinically so very strong, in terms of serving people with Alzheimer's and memory loss. The energy coming from the visual art itself engages in ways that are so unexpected, and actually they're quite mystical, so I don't think anyone really knows why this happens. The ability of the museum educators to break through and engage, always with the highest expectations, I think that is what we are finding is so important in our work.

Gene Cohen: There's been such a shortage of quality-of-life experiences for individuals with Alzheimer's — still you hear that there's no treatment for Alzheimer's disease and it's such a narrow use of the term. It means that right now we don't know how to prevent it; we don't know how to cure it; we don't know how to stop it. But there are all kinds of treatments that affect your quality of life and, in that broad spirit, what museums like MoMA are doing is a major contribution. They're getting people out; they're mobilizing the caregivers as well as the patients.

MoMA: If you were trying to convince a museum to begin a program like Meet Me at MoMA, what would you say?

Gay Hanna: That it's highly replicable and can be adapted to any museum of any size. It serves an untapped demographic that's huge and that's growing, and it will build new partnerships and awareness for the museum and what it can do. I think it's a very easy sell. I think the challenge, which is being met beautifully by MoMA, is coming forward with that clear, replicable model. Programs such as Meet Me at MoMA are really changing the whole paradigm of aging — from aging as a time of loss to aging as a time of gain and growth.

Gene Cohen: People want to tell their story. This is a period of life where you see a growing interest in writing autobiography, memoirs, genealogy, so this storytelling about one's life is normalizing, and also, in general, a lot of people who attend theater, opera, concerts, and museums are older persons, so it's normalizing in that sense to do so. I think museum programs are a terrific thing to do and help both the patients and the caregivers. These are the types of things that people remember; they eclipse the many ugly and depressing and distressing experiences. Having an upbeat experience, that's what most people tend to remember. It displaces a lot of the garbage in the memory.

MoMA: How do you see these types of programs affecting society at large?

Gay Hanna: There's a growing field in education called geragogy, which focuses on learning and teaching in later life. This is all emerging because our demographics are changing so dramatically, and will be for decades. We are interested in people living longer and healthier lives, and even if they aren't so healthy they need to have a way to be engaged and to find meaning and purpose. We as a society need to change our expectations.

