

## **A Tale of Three Women: Holocaust Experience and Transformation through Creative Expression and Engagement**

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*Gene Cohen notes the power of creativity in managing adversity (2000), lifting its emotional darkness and even contributing to physical healing. A model inspired by three Hungarian women artists who survived the Holocaust (Experience/Expression/Engagement) is illustrated through their experience of the Holocaust, their creative expression well into their later years, and the impact of their work on engagement of self and others. The potential for creativity in later life, and the impact of creativity on healing and transformation is discussed and illustrated by the creative contributions of three survivors and their enduring legacy.*

**KEYWORDS** *arts, creativity, creative expression, engagement, healing, transformation, Holocaust, legacy, generativity*

### PRELUDE

Early in November 2009, as I was putting the finishing touches on my symposium presentation for the upcoming Gerontological Society of America (GSA) conference—which was imbued with quotations from *The Creative Age* (Cohen, 2000)—a friend and mutual colleague of Gene Cohen called to tell me that he had passed away. I was stunned. How could that be? It was only about a year earlier he gave an inspiring presentation to participants gathered for a remarkable day of spirituality, creativity, and aging at the National Cathedral, and only a few months before that I had a wonderful

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opportunity to hear him speak and spend time with him as he became a Creative Longevity and Wisdom Fellow with Fielding Graduate University.

So, my GSA presentation became dedicated to Gene Cohen's legacy, and this article is a tribute to him. As a leading figure in research on arts and aging, Cohen and collaborators have demonstrated that active participation in the arts substantially contributes to the well-being of older adults (Cohen, 2006). Here, I share case studies of three astounding women, whose lives embraced the arts in story and images as they each navigated the trauma of the Holocaust in Hungary, their lives after the war, and their respective journeys to the United States.

Now in their later years, these women continue to share their creative expression of life experiences and bring hope to many in their later years. Their collective energy has inspired the Experience/Expression/Engagement model which aims to help us understand the process in which: (1) life experience spurs creative expression, (2) the art and writing stimulates further engagement of self and others, and (3) this social engagement results in further generativity. This model expands from the level of the individual to wider circles, ultimately engaging communities and contributing an enduring legacy.

## INTRODUCTION

In a study of Holocaust survivors led by Dr. Roberta Greene with John Templeton Foundation funds, 133 U.S. survivors were interviewed for "Forgiveness, Resilience and Survivorship among Holocaust Survivors" (Greene, 2010). As one of the co-investigators, I interviewed and coordinated interviews of California Holocaust survivors, and I was profoundly impressed by two participants in particular—their artwork and their urge to create and share widely their Holocaust and post-Holocaust experiences. In the process of engaging in the data collection and analysis, my exploration of the creative process led me to meet other Holocaust survivors who were also artists, some of whom began creating their art well into their later years of life.

Three Holocaust survivors—their life experiences, artistic expression, and expansive engagement of self and others in this generative process—are the focus of this article. All three are women who originally lived in Hungary and departed at distinctly different times. Elizabeth Mann and Eva Kolosvary-Stupler have engaged in visual art since early life, and their compelling work in paintings, sketches and assemblage (Eva) have informed many audiences of the lifelong effect of early trauma as well as the creative force that has enhanced their survivorship in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Erica Leon began painting and drawing following her emigration to the United States in her eighth decade of life. Her illustrated memoir, *Her Story in History* (Leon, n.d.) has inspired people of all ages to recognize that creative potential can be unleashed well into the later decades of life. All three, in addition to

their art, have shared their life stories as speakers in Los Angeles and in recordings (e.g. Erica Leon's story is archived in the U.S. Library of Congress American Folklife Center as part of the StoryCorps project; under the name Eva Kolosvary, her Hungarian name, Eva Kolosvary-Stupler's testimony is part of the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute Archives).

In this article, theoretical contributions and life story dimensions are presented that inform the Experience/Expression/Engagement model illustrated through specific examples of the three artists. A summary, conclusion, and a reflective postlude follow.

### THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

As the field of gerontology has burgeoned since the end of World War II, an interest in creativity in later life is emerging. The Experience/Expression/Engagement model draws on the work of Rollo May, Gene Cohen, Helen Kivnick, and Glenn Elder over the last few decades. Briefly, their specific influences are reviewed.

In Rollo May's treatise on creativity, *The Courage to Create* (1975), he states, "Creativity is the encounter of the intensively conscious human being with his or her world" (p. 54). May's observation of painters is that their underlying psychological and spiritual conditions are revealed in relation to the outer world. This reinforces the emerging area of research on the value of images, which can evoke stories and allow for more holistic communication (Weber, 2008). Hence the link of "experience" and "expression" in the model are precursors to the dimension of "engagement" of others in the creative process, which among Holocaust survivors becomes a healing task in the later years.

Gene Cohen's book landmark book, *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life* (Cohen, 2000) and groundbreaking collaborative studies on active participation in the arts describe how creativity encourages people to express and share life experiences, and to engage others in remembrance. In *The Creative Age*, Cohen describes an example of one Holocaust survivor who told his story for the first time to a middle-school class, and they all were moved to tears by the end of his presentation. This paralleled the experiences of many survivors in the Templeton study (Greene, 2010), who wished to leave a legacy:

Speaking about our experiences is very important especially today considering that humanity didn't learn much from our experiences and there are genocides going on right now. Yes, it is very important that we speak. (Cohen, Meek, & Lieberman, 2010, p. 537)

Several later life phases postulated by Cohen (2000) relate to the integration of the inner experience of the Holocaust with the outer expression and engagement of family members and communities by survivors. During the “Summing Up” phase of later life, Cohen suggests that the desire to find larger meaning in the story of one’s life “motivates people to give of the wisdom they have accrued throughout their lives” (Cohen, 2006, p. 9). Following “Summing Up” is the “Encore” phase, where lasting contributions are made in late life; this epitomizes the urge of many survivors to remind people that the Holocaust is not to be forgotten. The postulation of these later life stages supports the “engagement” dimension of the Experience/Expression/Engagement model for beyond expression of experience, Holocaust survivors contribute to the universal legacy of triumph in the struggle over oppression: providing enduring testimony through words and images.

Situating the dimension of “engagement” as an important extension beyond the individual “experience” and “expression” is supported by several theorists. First, as part of the life course perspective, Elder (1999) states that the life course is constructed by individuals through their choices and actions taken within the opportunities and constraints of historical time and social circumstances. For Holocaust survivors, there is still an opportunity to remind and engage people of all ages to acknowledge the horrors of war and the resilience required to endure it, survive its aftermath, and go on to lead a productive life. Second, Kivnick et al. describe a parallel concept, “vital involvement, which is defined as ‘purposeful activity,’ the circular mechanism through which individuals exercise capacities and make contributions of value to the world and to themselves, and through which they are influenced and changed by that world” (Kivnick, Stoffel, & Hanlon, 2003, p. 40). The creative expression coming forth from the life stories of Holocaust survivors reflects their generativity, which continues well into the later years of life.

This power of story to engage others is encapsulated in this quote referring to programs such as the Holocaust Survivor Centre in London, which provide a forum for elder survivors to contribute

... an institutionalized form of memorialisation. Their testimonies will be kept for posterity, and there will be no fear that their suffering will be forgotten. They are not only actively involved in the Holocaust Survival Centre, but act as educators, and take on a political role in warning others about the rise of fascism. They dispel many of the myths related to the elderly generally, and turn on its head the idea that the old should be looked after and die quietly. (Hassan, 1997, pp. 127–128)

Through my contacts with three Holocaust survivors from Hungary, individually and at their presentations/exhibits, I have been inspired to share their stories at conferences, in publications, and in my teaching. In turn, they

have fueled the development of the Experience/Expression/Engagement model (3E) generated by observations of how their life experiences are translated into creative expression, which engages others in their creative process and fuels further generativity into widening circles of influence. Following a brief introduction to the three artists, their contributions to the development of the 3E model are presented.

## THE ARTISTS

### Erica Leon

Born in 1921, Erica was engaged at the age of 17 to the late Robert (Bob) Leon. Bob left Hungary just before World War II started and eventually came to America, and through an amazing set of circumstances Bob and Erica ended up marrying 53 years later. As Erica states, “I was 17 when we were engaged, and 70 when we married!”

In more detail describing the Experience/Expression/Engagement model, Erica’s life experiences, creative expressions and engagement of students, members of her retirement community and the Holocaust survivor community in Los Angeles are discussed. To give a glimpse into how these elements come together, we consider a sketch from her life story, *Her Story in History* (Leon, n.d.). It tells the story of her escape to the site of her eventual freedom at the end of the war (Figure 1).

Erica was spared being rounded up and sent to the ghetto, when she cleverly took a bandage from a prior injury and wrapped it around her leg as the Nazis burst in to the apartment where she was hiding. It would have meant certain death if she was part of the evacuation, but perhaps fearing she had something contagious, the Nazis left her behind. Her goal was to get to the Red Cross hospital (in the background of Figure 1), where her first husband was sent from a labor camp.

In the foreground of Figure 1, Erica is seen in a phone booth, clutching a book to hide her yellow star marking her as a Jew. It is dusk at the time, and any Jew caught after dark would surely be shot. And yet, if she went to the hospital door she might also be captured. Taking her chances in the hopes of being with her husband, she ran to the hospital and an amazing thing happened. The guards let her in—they were Jews who had stolen Nazi uniforms!

So, in the final days of the war, Erica lived in the basement of the hospital, barely eating, hiding under a box when the Nazis would come looking for Jews in hiding. This picture represents just one of many remarkable stories that Erica has to tell of constant danger and creative solutions—in words and in images. She has inspired many people of all ages with her story and embellishment in her art, as demonstrated and detailed in the Experience/Expression/Engagement model.





**FIGURE 1** Sketch by Erica Leon from *Her Story in History* (Leon, n.d.).

## Elizabeth Mann

Elizabeth's urge to create dates back early in life, for example, when she tied hair to matchsticks to create a paintbrush. After surviving concentration camps and labor camps before ending up in Sweden after liberation, one of her first requests when hospitalized was art materials. She drew sketches of her experiences, which she has kept to this day. Another keepsake was a photo of her parents who perished in the Holocaust; from this photograph she made their portrait, which now hangs in her gallery at home. One haunting image Elizabeth painted from the Holocaust is a woman in a shawl, whose eyes express the sorrow and agony of loss. Yet, other scenes are bucolic—representing no one place in particular according to Elizabeth, but often having birds flying off in the distance. A (former) graduate student interprets the birds as a sign of hope and freedom.

Elizabeth is a regular presenter at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and has spoken innumerable times at other museums and in classrooms across Southern California. She has a cabinet full of letters of gratitude from those who were profoundly moved by her story; some have even created works of art for Elizabeth. Even though her hands shake and she can no longer write, she continues to paint. Her work has been exhibited at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust (see more in the Experience/Expression/Engagement model).

## Eva Kolosvary-Stupler

Best known for her work as an assemblage artist, Eva has adapted to various medical challenges and taken up other media such as colored pencils in an anatomically-inspired series after multiple back surgeries. One powerful piece, reflecting the horrors of mass extermination during the Holocaust, is Eva's assemblage "Arbeit Macht Frei." Translated as "Work Makes You Free," these words (often over the gateway to concentration camps) form an arch over a discarded fuse box. Each door of the fuse box opens to piles of skeletons, representing the ovens at the extermination sites. This work was one of two assemblages chosen for an exhibit commemorating the Armenian genocide in Glendale, California in 2009, and is discussed further in the Experience/Expression/Engagement model.

Although Eva believes she would have created art regardless of whether or not she experienced the Holocaust and the Communist era in Hungary, she finds it helps her manage life's pain. In one review of a retrospective exhibit it is noted:

Her work is autobiographical, and the survivor element is a major component of her art. In her life, she has suffered through physical pain, surgeries, war, anti-Semitism, oppression and displacement. Yet she is

very direct in communicating her anguish and sharing her essence though her art. (Burnes, 2007, p. 3)

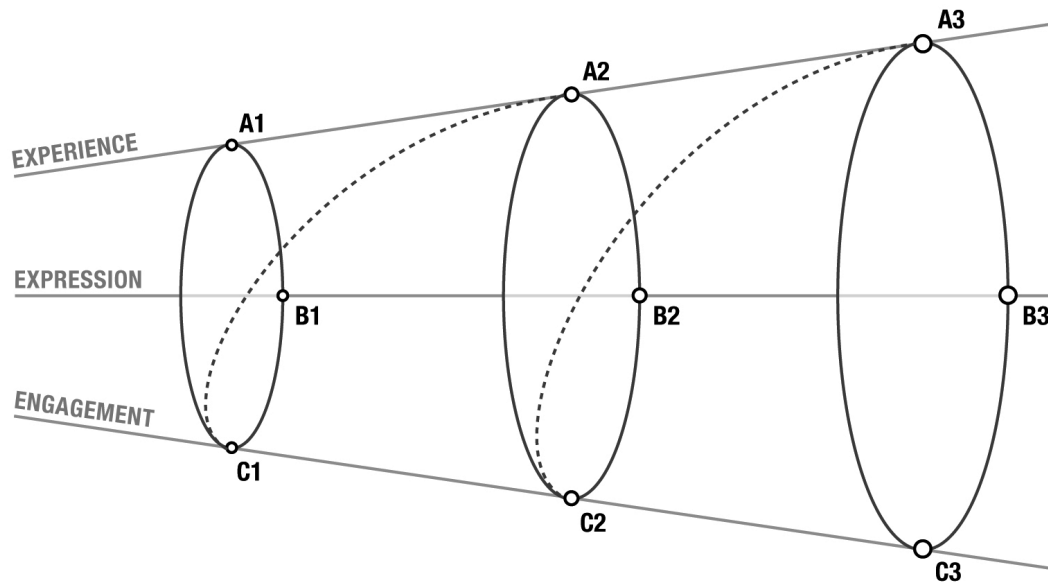
In an essay on “The Transformation of Loss: The Art of Eva Kolosvary-Stupler,” Clothier (2007, p. 4) observes that “the assemblage art of Eva Kolosvary-Stupler is essentially an act and a re-enactment—of recovery and survival. . . . it resonates with the depths of the human soul and the soaring of the creative spirit.”

### THE EXPERIENCE/EXPRESSION/ENGAGEMENT MODEL

The Experience/Expression/Engagement model (3E) emerged from over two years of immersion in the art and life stories of the three women (Erica/Eva/Elizabeth) who survived the Holocaust in Hungary and ultimately came to reside in Los Angeles.

As shown in Figure 2, each cycle of the model enlarges over the previous cycle. Metaphorically, the model works like a telescope, *where the*

#### EXPERIENCE, EXPRESSION, and ENGAGEMENT MODEL



A1 = Original Holocaust Experience

B1 = Creating Art, Writing Life Story

C1 = Art Exhibits, Testimonials, Interviews

A2 = Renewed Energy, Affirmation, Sense of Agency

B2 = Creative Work Enhanced

C2 = Vital Involvement, Continued Sharing

A3 = Communal Support

B3 = Collective Memory

C3 = Historical Connectedness

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**FIGURE 2** Experience/Expression/Engagement model (Corley).



*view from a distance is enlarged in scope.* From left to right, it represents how building on the individual's life experience, creative expression, and engagement of self and others in the process expands in depth and magnitude over time, offering universal messages of hope and possibility, as well as an enduring legacy. Various creative expressions, primarily of Erica Leon, are used to illustrate the model, with each component of the model noted in parentheses.

Erica spent months in hiding and narrowly escaped being sent to concentration camps during the final year of World War II in Hungary. She was fortunate to be saved through the intervention of Swedish diplomat and humanitarian Raoul Wallenberg, who saved the lives of tens of thousands of Jews (A1).

Following the end of the war, Erica remained in Hungary with her first husband, and together they raised their son there. In 1990, several years after her husband's death, Erica visited her first fiancé, Robert Leon (Bob), whom she had not seen since 1938. Within days they decided to marry. Bob lived in Los Angeles and taught art at a local retirement community. It was there that Erica took up painting, and on her annual trips back to Budapest to visit her son, she would make sketches that she used to paint many beautiful landscapes of Budapest when she returned home (B1).

Upon returning from her last trip to Budapest in 2001, after being "grounded" on 9/11 and unable to return to Los Angeles for five days, Erica was determined to write and draw, not only about her experiences of the Holocaust, but about her entire life story. By this time, Erica and Bob had moved into the retirement community where Bob had worked, and many of the residents and their families took great interest in reading Erica's book. The love story of Erica and Bob also became the subject of several television interviews (C1).

Feeling affirmed by growing interest in her art and experiencing a sense of agency, Erica expanded the scope of her painting to include landscapes of other parts of Europe and in California (A2). She contributed her oral history to a StoryCorps project on immigrants (<http://storycorps.org/>) and at the age of 88, Erica had her first art exhibit at the retirement community where she lives (B2). Through her participation in a national study of Holocaust survivors, students from different academic institutions connected with Erica and one (Randall Bell) was moved to create a YouTube production about her (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhsnyHFO6tI>), which reveals her uplifting philosophy of life in spite of adversities she has faced throughout nearly 90 years of life (C2). Another (former) student notes: "The amount of trauma Erica experienced and survived is unreal—decades later, Erica demonstrates her will to live and to give life and hope through her art" (Oteka Macklin, personal communication, August 4, 2010).

Erica's desire to share her experiences more widely led to her donating a painting to the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust (LAMOTH) and having her book, *Her Story in History* (Leon, ND) become part of the Museum's archives (A3). Along with Elizabeth Mann, Erica participated in a symposium on the national study of Holocaust survivors led by Roberta Greene (2010): "Holocaust Survivors: Stories of Resilience," held at LAMOTH in 2009 (B3). The audience heard her perspective on the Holocaust and viewed a selection of her paintings. Erica's life is now part of a wider legacy of resilience among Holocaust survivors (Corley, 2010; Greene, 2010), and her presence has left a lasting impression on many of all ages, including numerous students from diverse communities of Los Angeles, who interviewed her for course assignments (C3). Many of these students are immigrants from countries where some of their ancestors were refugees from oppressive regimes, and were inspired by Erica's story to learn more about their own family histories.

An African American woman in her 30s who also met Erica Leon and Elizabeth Mann in their homes and attended the Holocaust symposium in Los Angeles shares the following: Unlike my previous experiences during my childhood [feeling anger and fear watching World War II documentaries and visiting a Holocaust museum], my time spent with Ms. Leon and Ms. Mann left me with feelings of hope and optimism about the ability of aging people to survive tragedy. Creative expression that gave voice to events, emotions, and memories too painful to describe or comprehend was born out of the incredible losses suffered by these two women. Creativity, therefore, became (and remains) a vehicle for remembrance, forgiveness, and existence. (Oteka Macklin, personal communication, August 4, 2010)

The sense of connectedness to universal human experiences is epitomized in the choice of two of Eva Kolasvary-Stupler's assemblages in 2009 for the exhibit, "Man's Inhumanity to Man: Journey Out of Darkness." Part of a commemorative event around the time of the Armenian Genocide remembrance in Glendale, California, the exhibit was intended to educate viewers about a broad range of historical tragedies in the hope of preventing them in the future. "Arbeit Macht Frei" described earlier was one of the pieces chosen. One reviewer of another of Eva's exhibits notes: "she transforms common things into new cultural treasures with a new magic and spirituality for our own time and for the future" (Canty, 2010).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In spite of illnesses and physical challenges each woman endures, some dating back to the war and early childhood, the urge to create persists.

Following surgeries resulting in limited mobility, two of the women found ways to continue their creative expression through changing media (e.g., Eva expanded to sketches to compensate for the physical demands of assemblage work). Rather than being seen as frail and declining, these women are regarded as inspiring.

Hence, the experience of connection with others through art is accompanied by healing. As noted by Malchiodi (2002), “By sharing your creative spirit in a larger community, you extend your artistic wisdom to others in positive and transformative ways while healing yourself” (p. 193).

By re-engagement with a larger community, wounding from trauma becomes a source of strength for those who suffer now and can help prevent suffering in future generations (R. Yakimo, personal communication, August 3, 2010). As the Experience/Expression/Engagement model illustrates, sharing and connecting with others in larger circles of influence can have a widespread impact.

Among the outcomes and enduring legacy of the life experiences of the three artists—which include surviving the Holocaust—are the hundreds of testimonials Elizabeth Mann has delivered at museums and universities, Eva’s testimonial in the USC Shoah Foundation Institute database and her many art exhibits, and Erica’s StoryCorps recording archived at the U.S. Library of Congress as well as her memoir, *Her Story in History* (n.d.) archived at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust. A play was written about Erica reuniting with Bob in a youth literacy project called “Through the Ages” in Los Angeles and performed at the retirement community where she lives. Through the sharing of the individual life experiences of these three women, greater meaning is derived, and collectively their creative contributions, which highlight persistence through life’s challenges, inspire people of all ages.

The artistry of Erica, Elizabeth, and Eva provides a visual narrative that contributes to scholarship on the incorporation of images in understanding life story (Corley, 2010; Weber, 2008). One artist who has met two of the survivors, and who herself is a painter, notes the following about her own art:

I paint myself as a way to recapture my existence as I have no pictures from my childhood or adolescence. I paint myself into existence as an affront to those who tried to destroy me. Each painting is a part of me that reflects back the reality of my existence. (W. Hamachi, personal communication, August 12, 2010)

The work presented here can contribute to the development of theories in gerontology, which to date have largely overlooked creativity and its enhancement of well-being through art. For example, there are no entries under “art” or “creativity” in the seminal volume, *Handbook of Theories of Gerontology* (Bengston, Gans, Putney, & Silverstein, 2009). Additionally,

in *Social Gerontology: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2008) it is noted: “Much of the research on creativity has been performed as analyses of the *products* of artists and writers, not on their creative *process* directly” (p. 199). The process of transforming life experience into forms of expression that engage self and others illustrates the capacity for growth across the life course, as illustrated in the experiences of Holocaust survivors.

It is anticipated that through the Experience/Expression/Engagement model, new modalities which promote creative expression among older adults and new venues for sharing their experiences and engaging larger audience will emerge. For example, Malchiodi (2002) suggests forming creativity and wellness groups in small communities, which could easily be extended to programs where older adults congregate as well as creating opportunities for intergenerational sharing.

The Experience/Expression/Engagement model has been discussed in light of the power of art to heal, to inform, and to address negative stereotypes about older adults. It reinforces the groundbreaking work of Cohen (2006) by addressing the “conceptual sea change in aging” and exemplifying the later life developmental processes explored by Cohen (2000) and Erikson (Moody, 2009), which include generativity and leaving a legacy. The three visual artists presented are in their late 70s to late 80s in age and continue to produce and exhibit new works. Their collective works contribute toward understanding survivorship, resilience, healing from trauma, and promoting global awareness of the long-term impact of genocide.

Managing adversity through creativity via the specific example of the art of Holocaust survivors has implications for incorporating creative modalities in working with survivors of trauma at large. As noted in *Soul's Palette: Drawing on Art's Transformative Powers for Health and Well-Being*:

Through creative expression and imagination we naturally find ourselves developing new stories for life experiences and discover that we are awakened to something beyond pain, suffering, and illness . . . Artistic expression is one of our elemental tools for achieving psychological integration, a universal creative urge that helps us strive for emotional well-being. (Malchiodi, 2002, pp. 9, 11)

At a time when there are growing reports of denial that the Holocaust ever occurred (e.g., among leaders of countries with a long history of anti-Semitism), it is all the more imperative that work be conducted and disseminated that informs students, professionals and the public at large about the long-term consequences of intolerance and oppression. Yehudit Shendar (2010), Deputy Director of the Museums Division at Yad Vashem (2010) and curator of the 2010–2011 exhibition called “Virtues of Memory: Six Decades of Holocaust Survivors’ Creativity” notes:

Art is that most subjective of creative forms, but in the survivors' art we glimpse a truth that we—being removed from the events—may not otherwise be able to fathom. Each of the works is the voice of an individual; combined, they present a powerful ensemble, whose commanding expression of truth and memory calls out to us all.

## POSTLUDE

As noted by Susan Perlstein, longtime collaborator of Gene Cohen, “The need for creativity never ends” (Perlstein, 2006, p. 5). The enduring legacy of Cohen's work and inspiration is a call for further exploration of the capacity of the human spirit to engage in what is uniquely human: creative expression. The emerging body of theories and models that contribute to a more expansive view of the untapped potential for growth in the later years creates a more positive image of aging. Because the world population is increasingly an older population, developments in the realm of creativity and aging are welcome, and necessary.

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