

# **Living From Inside Out: The Value of Conscious Aging and the Foray (4a+) "Beyond Self" Paradigm**

"Growing" older can open possibilities never thought possible. New research supports a trio of fresh ideas for getting there.

*By Theresa Southam, PhD and  
Connie S. Corley, MSW, MA, PhD*



[www.csa.us](http://www.csa.us)

Copyright 2020 Society of Certified Senior Advisors



# LIVING FROM INSIDE OUT: The Value of Conscious Aging and the Foray (4A+) “Beyond Self” Paradigm

“Growing” older can open possibilities never thought possible.  
New research supports a trio of fresh ideas for getting there.

BY THERESA SOUTHAM, PHD AND CONNIE S. CORLEY, MSW, MA, PHD

**G**rowing in later life is not a given; in fact, many older adults are healthy and active but may still feel something is missing. We share stories and processes, facilitated by several practices illustrated here, demonstrating that living from the inside out is life enhancing for self and others. Informed by research, the 4A model previously presented is expanded to 4A+ as the journey or “foray” into the unknown of old age unfolds for an increasing number of people living long lives.

## The Emergence of Conscious Aging

In many cultures, the work of elders is less about formal work and more about engaging in inner work. In the context of “positive aging,” there is growing interest of “conscious aging.” In this article we provide examples from participants in a research study and share practices of conscious aging in order to further enhance this complex time in the life course.

“Maybe we’ve evolved as much as we’re going to evolve biologically and the next real evolution of humankind is the evolution of human consciousness” (Schlitz, Vieten, & Erickson-Freeman, 2011, p. 228).

Self-actualization, a process of becoming better, healthier people, is multi-faceted and can emerge at various times. Self-actualization can be accompanied by increased instances of self-transcendence. Researcher Susanne Cook-Greuter writes that self-transcendence is not a later stage of self-actualization, but a completely separate process; one becomes open to non-rational sources of input (2000). Moody (2002) adds that through established long-term practices, we may reach higher stages of psychological functioning and “transcend” unhelpful midlife patterns.

In conscious aging, or gerotranscendence, older adults tend to become less self-focused, more selective in their social activities, and spend more time in solitude and introspection. People who engage in conscious aging practices report a reduction in the fear of death, increased broadmindedness, and a sense of tolerance, along with feelings of unity with the universe and a new view of time (Tornstam, 2005).

It is not surprising that the body, mind, *and the spirit* continue to evolve and change until the day we die. However, gerontologists often focus on the body and mind, and less on conscious aging, a process that can be viewed as nurturing spirits and souls.



### Forays with and Beyond Self (4A+) Aging Paradigm

In recent research, several highly generative adults aged seventy and up were found to be not only wise, but also experiencing transcendence (Southam, 2020). Immersed in caring for others (their communities, families, and the Earth), these older adults were also informed by experiences that connected them to other worlds and ways of knowing not seen to be this world. In this article we expand on a manuscript previously published in this journal, called: *Positive Aging Perspectives and a New Paradigm: Foray (4A) into Aging* (Corley and Southam, 2018). We discuss how the specific tools, life maps, LifeForward plans, and wisdom circles can help older adults age consciously, avoid being pressured into activities created by those on the outside and, instead, lead a life from the inside out.

In the original model by Corley called “4A” (Awareness, Affiliation, Attitude, and Activity) (Corley, 2011), a range of practices were found to promote continuous development, health, and well-being in older adults. The practices led to more active reflection on life’s experiences, maintaining and creating new social networks, heightened awareness of one’s

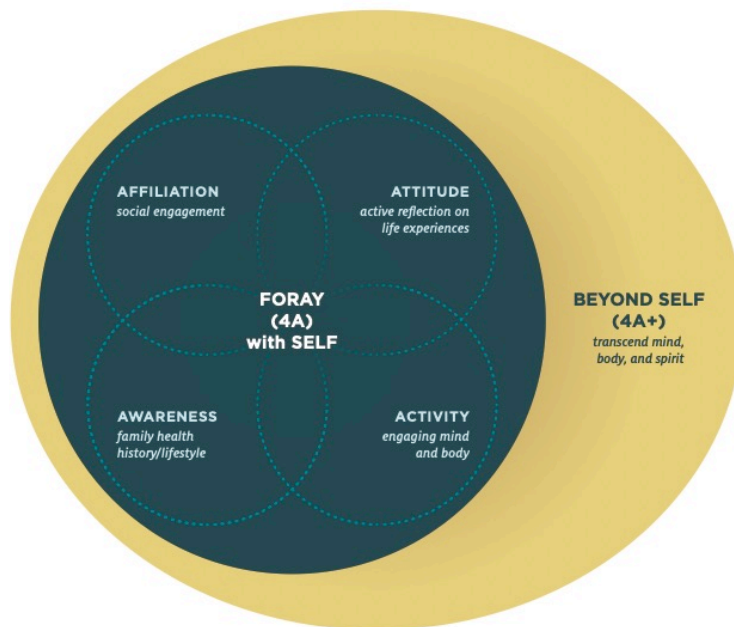
health, and active engagement of the mind and body. Although the participants in the recent study (Southam, 2020) engaged in these processes of actualizing the self, they were also found to transcend the mind, body, and spirit. These discoveries led to a proposal for an expanded model: Foray (4A+) Beyond Self. See Figure 1.

Transcendence has been described as “a state of consciousness that one can enter, but leaves upon returning to ordinary reality” (Cook-Greuter, 2000, p. 232). The activities described by the research participants that led them to transcendence included deepening spiritual and religious practices, letting go of possessions, embracing ongoing “relationships” with people who have died, integrating the head and heart, appreciating their shared humanity, and realizing the fluid nature of knowledge (Southam, 2020). Older adults were found to travel in and out of the ego-bound, self-actualizing self, growing through transcendence. One example is Chris, profiled below.

Chris, one of the study participants, described transcendent experiences through his lifelong pursuit of photographing nature. He has lived in his community in Canada since he was a young man, making a



FIGURE 1. FORAY (4A) MODEL (CORLEY, 2011) EXPANDED BY CO-AUTHORS TO FORAY (4A) + BEYOND SELF.



living from photography, publishing books, and giving workshops. Most of his activity has focused on conserving the region he so loves. At seventy-nine, having accomplished much over his life, he has delighted himself with what still lies in store. Now comfortably living with his partner in a house they built and working from his straw bale-construction studio, Chris describes himself as not very religious, but very spiritual. His health is good. When he was twenty-five, Chris survived a serious car accident he says should have killed him. “My father told me I was spared because I had something special to contribute. Those words were inspirational and I never forgot them,” Chris said. Throughout his life, Chris has “transcended” this world by immersing himself in nature and through his photographs. One day in 2019, as he and the researcher (Southam) approached a high point in the landscape on a photographic outing, he said, “When I come up onto the plateau, I leave this other world.”

Lately, Chris has been engaging in artist retreats, places where artists can stay for weeks and pursue their art. He signs up for nearby retreats and recently for one overseas in Europe. During these times alone in nature he explores other realities. He displays pure joy with techniques he employs completely within his camera:

“Possibilities of any subject matter are endless!  
There are literally thousands of ways with which

I can approach any subject and express myself in a way that I never have before, I never dreamt of [shaking his head in disbelief]. So now photography is opening up a world that no one else has ever seen. I’ve never seen it. I’m able to share worlds that [my workshop participants] don’t know exist. That’s pretty cool. You feel it in the audience when you show them. It is like wow!” he chuckles, and turns off the highway to the location of his next shoot.

Chris has learned his father also explored abstract themes. He was surprised to find this out when he returned to the city of his childhood. It was during a presentation he was making at a photography club where his father had been a prominent member that his father’s friends approached him. He and his father shared a mentor, so he realized that he shouldn’t have been surprised in their common interests.

Reminiscing and facing mortality, as Chris is doing, are all part of healthy aging. Cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien noted that as we age, we have four frontiers to face: knowing from what we are coming and toward what we are going, becoming a mentor, coping with the natural challenges of an aging body, and embracing the inevitability of our own death (Arrien, 2007). In their recent book *Walking Each Other Home: Conversations on Loving and Dying*, Dass and Bush discuss old age as a window of opportunity, when older adults “can give up accumulating experiences and material possessions and instead appreciate the connectedness of all things” (2018, p. 11). The authors discuss a range of practices that aid conscious aging, such as being present, cultivating compassion and loving kindness, and dying into loving awareness. Dass, who experienced a stroke at age sixty-six, embodied many of these practices up to the time of his death at age eighty-eight in December, 2019.

Facing Arrien’s four frontiers while engaging in practices that help to transcend the mind, body, and spirit are essential in the life of consciously aging older adults. They may travel back and forth between self-actualizing and self-transcending. Tools that are known to be helpful in self-actualization, described in the original Foray (4A) model, may also aid in self-transcendence, including autobiography, life maps, attention, intention, and deep listening (Corbett, 2013; Erikson, 1988; Gardner, 2000; Maslow, 1971; Tornstam, 2005). For the expanded model Foray (4A+) – Beyond Self, we will examine the life map, the LifeForward Plan, and wisdom circles as examples of practical tools for older adults who are interested in continuous development towards self-transcendence.

## Practical Tools for Leading from Inside Out

In this section we discuss tools and activities that help older adults reflect on what has been important (see life map), focus on what is important now (see LifeForward Plan), and support their conscious aging in community (wisdom circles). These tools were self-reported to be transformative in the research. The participants were living the life they wanted to live, as opposed to just living their lives. Their experiences could be helpful for older adults who follow the Foray (4A) model to guide their lifelong learning and who are interested in a more contemplative and transcendent late life.

### LIFE MAP

Methods such as reminiscence, life review, and autobiography have flourished in the aging field to help older adults integrate their life experiences (Cohen, 2006a & 2006b). Understanding life narratives, including major transitions and what is learned from them, can elevate wisdom, generativity, and transcendence among seniors. In the research by Southam (2019), nine participants aged seventy and up created life maps. See Jan's life map below. The life map for this study was based on the work of Hodge (2005) and Stinson (2013). An 11" x 14" piece of paper was

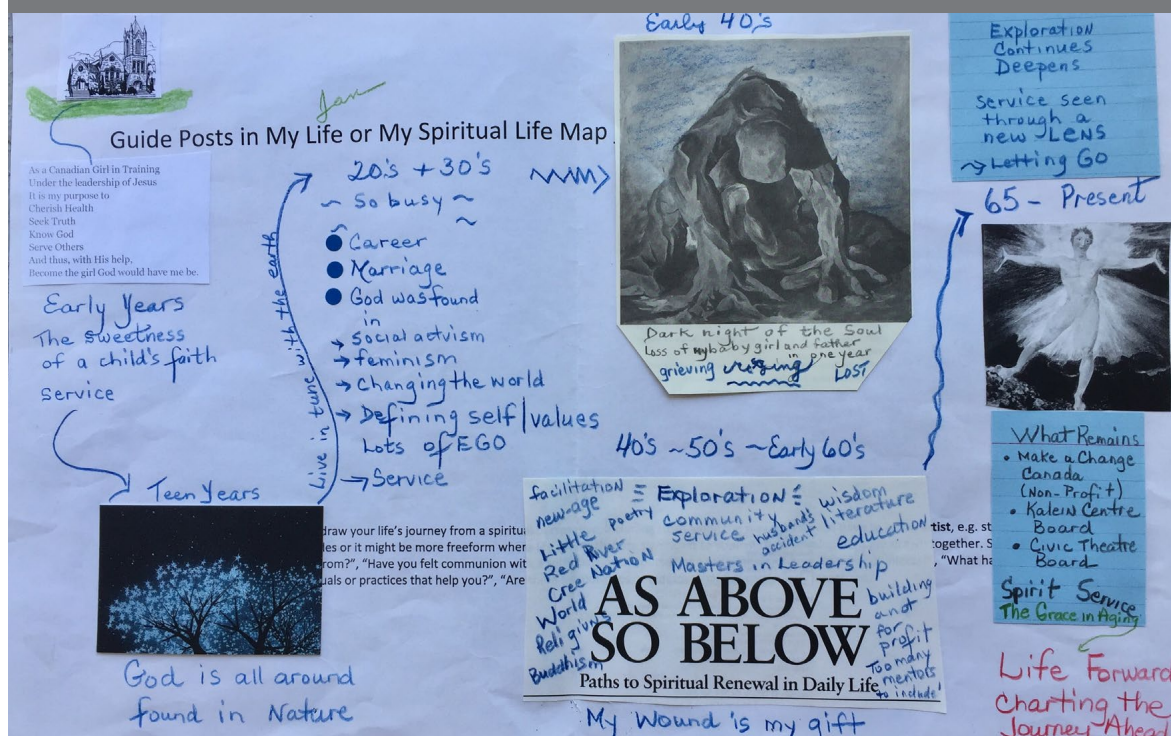
FIGURE 2. CHRIS ON HIS BELOVED CHILCOLTIN PLATEAU.



used with the title *Guide Posts in My Life or Spiritual Life Map*. Instructions at the bottom of the page read: "On this sheet of paper draw your life's journey from a spiritual perspective, including stops along the way. You **do not have to be an artist**; e.g., stick people are fine! Your path might be linear, by decades, or it might be more freeform where life events that are significant to your spiritual development are drawn together." Some prompts on the map included:

- "What trials have you learned from?"

FIGURE 3. JAN'S LIFE MAP



- “Have you felt communion with a spirit outside of yourself or a redefinition of time, space and objects?”
- “What have you learned from life’s experiences?”
- “Are there rituals or practices that help you?”
- “Are there relationships or mentors that are particularly important?”

Jan, one of the research participants, is seventy and only recently retired from a leadership position. She is already on the board of several community non-profits. For her, this project came just at the right time. Reflecting on major transitions in her life and planning what is important in the future were timely tasks (Figure 3); she was in the process of deciphering what is next for her.

Jan discusses how she transcends herself in the process of the life map:

You [referring to the researcher] walked into my life right when I was struggling with what I’d

accomplished. You were a witness. Participating in this research opened my heart. I usually ask the questions. You pushed me out of the script leading to my personal transformation. Whoever I see in my day, I speak with them differently now. It has made me very happy. At first, the life map was challenging for most of the participants. They were encouraged to “just identify four or five major transitions and what you learned from them.” Once complete, the life map was transformative for all of the participants.

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Tools that help older adults identify what’s important in the next chapter can help them clear time and space for transcendent experiences and give them courage to age consciously. In the study by Southam (2020), participants engaged in exercises from *LifeForward: Charting the Journey Ahead*. After decades of research, study, and writing about adult development, McLean (2016) developed templates for planning out the later phases of life. The LifeForward plan (McLean, 2016) was created to help adults grow into elderhood and navigate the “rapid, dramatic, and disruptive change” (viii) that is manifest in today’s world. McLean writes, “We will probably have many more chapters in our lives than our parents had. Many of us today will enjoy an added bonus round of twenty-some years of life compared to past generations. If we are going to prosper in our elder years, the work starts now!” (2016, p. ix).

Another research participant, Mary, had also just retired from a leadership position like Jan, but in her case it had been in healthcare. At seventy-nine, she speaks of the first few years after retirement as a time when she said “no” to many things. Mary knew that she needed some time to reassess and figure out what she wanted to do with the next stage of her life. She is now volunteering but is careful with her time and commitments. Divorced, she lives alone outside of town and enjoys the peace and solitude there. She describes herself as not very religious, but spiritual. She refers to her health as good. Below is an example of a portion of a LifeForward plan where Mary demonstrates her commitment

FIGURE 4. MARY’S LIFEFORWARD PLAN.

Appendix 13: LifeForward Plan  
**Life Forward Plan**  
(Adapted from *Charting the Journey Ahead*, Pamela Mclean)

**PART ONE: Who do I want to be?**

1. What are your measuring sticks for the next few years? (Choose top three and number in priority where “1” is highest priority, “2” is second and “3” last priority.)

- Accumulating – money and things
- Respect for accomplishments
- 2 Love, intimacy and strong relationships
- Good, productive, and value-centred children
- Successful work/volunteer life
- Pastimes, hobbies and sport
- 3 Spiritual Path
- Making a lasting contribution
- 1 Making sense of my life and sharing it with others

2. Based on your choices above, finish the sentence “My purpose, for the next chapter of my life, is to ...”

*continue making sense of my life & sharing it with others, helping my family & friends understand that strong relationships foundations give me freedom & courage to explore my own path.*

3. Roles Matter (check the nature, e.g. essential, fulfilling, unfulfilling of each role now and then in the future given your purpose above)

Role	Essential		Fulfilling		Unfulfilling	
	Now	Future	Now	Future	Now	Future
Personal	✓	✓				
Couple					✓	✓
Family	✓	✓				
Friends	✓	✓				
Work			✓	✓		
Community			✓			



to spirituality and discusses the steps she will take along the way.

### WISDOM CIRCLES

As older adults age consciously, they may face many barriers, such as conflicts with caregivers, family, and friends who do not see the opportunity for continuous growth in them. Wisdom circles have been defined as peer-to-peer “gatherings which help to create and maintain social connections with other like-minded persons” (Sage-ing International, 2019). They are a way for older adults to deal communally on a regular basis with life completion in a place of safety and respect. Some circles reclaim the name of “circle of elders.” Jan went on to help create, and then participate in, a wisdom circle as a way to support her conscious aging. Having peer-to-peer support is vital as older adults, like others, are vulnerable to social isolation.

### Conclusion

Immersed in caring for others (their communities, families, and the Earth), many older adults do not take the time to appreciate themselves or to consider whether their actions align with their own purpose. Nine highly generative older adults reported that engaging in self-reflection on major turning points in their lives, and prioritizing what’s important in their upcoming years, was transformative for them (Southam, 2020). The 4A+ model was shared here along with some specific tools like life maps and LifeForward plans to help older adults avoid being pressured into activities created by those on the outside and, instead, lead from inside. •CSA



A 2020 PhD in Human and Organizational Development, **Theresa Southam** continues her research as a Fielding ISI Fellow. Her research interests include the lived experience of moving between post conventional stages of human development and emerging into transcendence, the practices that older adults use to enter and exit transcendence, the insights gathered from these travels, as well as how these insights are applied for the greater good. Theresa has contributed a blog post and book review to the Association for Anthropology, Gerontology and the Lifecourse. Theresa Southam, PhD [tsoutham@email.fielding.edu](mailto:tsoutham@email.fielding.edu)



**Connie Corley, MSW, MA, PhD** is a professor at Fielding Graduate University and Professor Emeritus at California State University, Los Angeles. A Fellow of the Gerontological Society of America and the Academy of Gerontology in Higher Education, Dr. Corley has pub-

lished widely and presented internationally. She co-hosted and produced a radio program, Experience Talks, at Pacifica station KPFK-FM in Los Angeles and spearheaded the podcast Love Goes Viral. [conniecorleyphd@gmail.com](mailto:conniecorleyphd@gmail.com) · 626-532-7438 · [conniecorleyphd.com](http://conniecorleyphd.com)

### REFERENCES

- Arrien, A. (2007). *The second half of life: Opening the eight gates of wisdom*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True Publishing.
- Cook-Greuter, S. R. (2000). Mature ego development: A gateway to ego transcendence? *Journal of Adult Development*, 7(4), 227-240.
- Corbett, L. (2013). Successful aging: Jungian contributions to development in later life. *Psychological Perspectives*, 56(2), 149-167.
- Corley, C. (2011). Issues of aging. In Wildflower, L. & D. Brennan (Eds.), *The Handbook of knowledge-based coaching: From theory to practice*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Corley, C., & Southam, T. (2018). Positive aging perspectives and a new paradigm: Foray (4A) into aging. *Certified Seniors Advisor Journal*, 2, 46-50.
- Dass, R., & Bush, M. (2018). *Walking each other home: Conversations on loving and dying*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True Publishing.
- Erikson, J. (1988). *Wisdom and the senses: The way of creativity*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Gardner, H. E. (2000). *Intelligence reframed: Multiple intelligences for the 21st century*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Hodge, D. R. (2005). Spiritual life maps: A client-centered pictorial instrument for spiritual assessment, planning, and intervention. *Social Work*, 50(1), 77.
- Maslow, A. H. (1971). *The farther reaches of human nature*. London, England: Arkana/Penguin Books.
- McLean, P. D. (2016). *LifeForward: Charting the journey ahead*. Washington, DC: The Hudson Institute Press.
- Moody, R. H. (2002). Conscious aging: A strategy for positive development. In Ronch, J. & J. Goldfield (Eds.), *Mental wellness in aging: Strengths-based approaches* (Vol. 17, pp. 143-144). Baltimore, MD: Health Professions Press.
- Sage-ing International. (2019). *Wisdom circles*. Retrieved from <https://www.sage-ing.org/about/circles-chapters/>
- Schlitz, M. M., Vieten, C., & Erickson-Freeman, K. (2011). Conscious aging and worldview transformation. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 43(2), 223-238.
- Southam, T. (2020). *27,000 sunrises: Everyday contributions of grateful and giving age 70+ adults* (Human and Organizational Development). Santa Barbara, CA: Fielding Graduate University, ProQuest.
- Stinson, A. M. (2013). *Spiritual life review with older adults: Finding meaning in late life development*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/4778>
- Tomstam, L. (2005). *Gerotranscendence: A developmental theory of positive aging*. New York, NY: Springer.