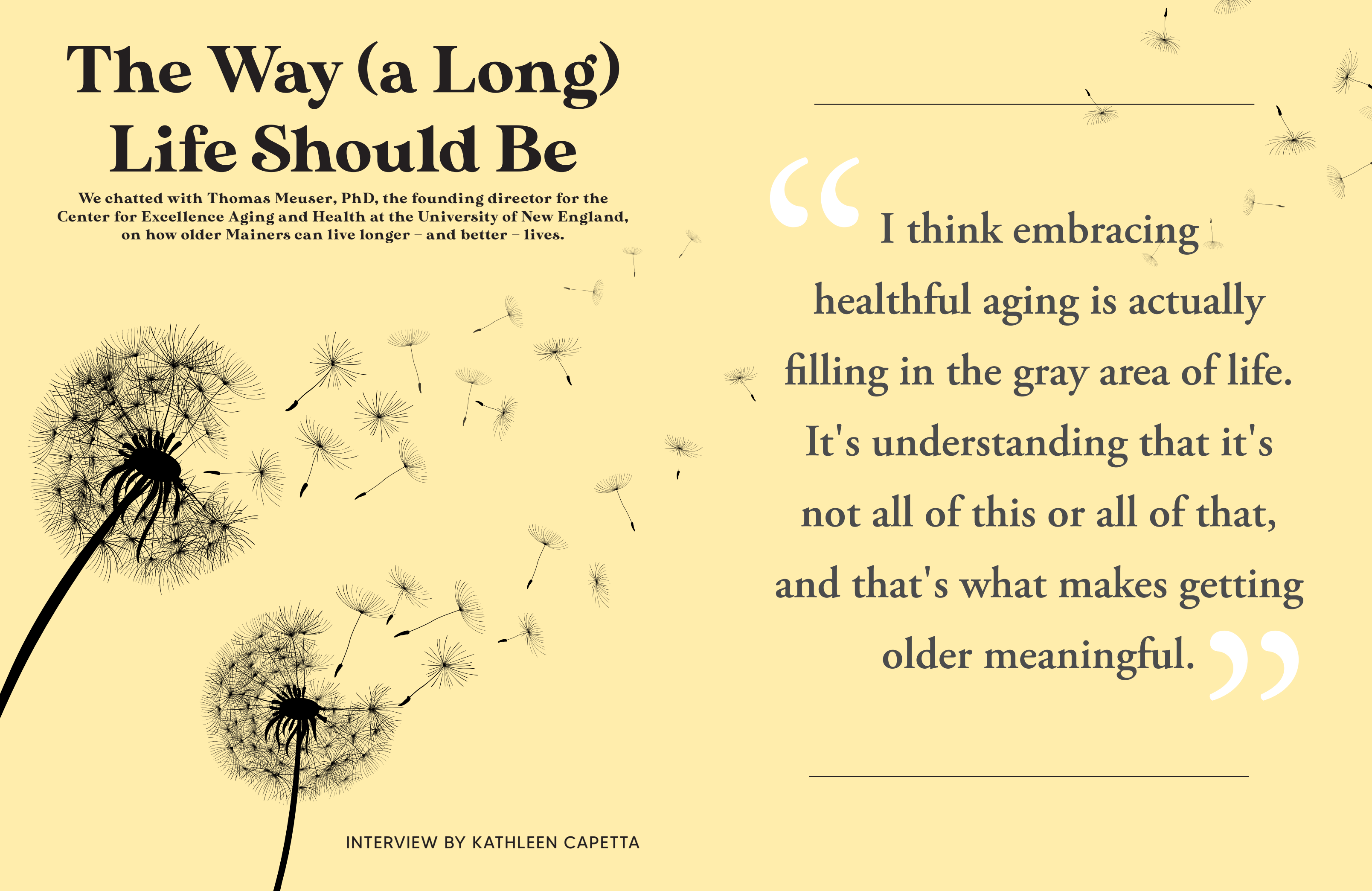


The Way (a Long) Life Should Be

We chatted with Thomas Meuser, PhD, the founding director for the Center for Excellence Aging and Health at the University of New England, on how older Mainers can live longer – and better – lives.

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INTERVIEW BY KATHLEEN CAPETTA



(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

KC: Tell me a little bit about why you founded the center and what you're trying to achieve with it.

TM: The university of New England became an age-friendly university in 2017. There's an international body based out of Dublin City University in Ireland that designates schools that wish to be welcoming and inclusive of all ages, and UNE was the fifth US institution to receive an age-friendly designation. At the same time, UNE received a large gift from a donor to start an aging center. At that time, I was the director of the gerontology graduate program at the University of Missouri. I've been looking to relocate back to where I was raised in the Northeast. I was also a family caregiver for aging parents, so it was a good match. I was able to get back here for my own purposes, but also to advance my career.

The center is all about intergenerational engagement - we have a group now of over 600 older adults that we call our legacy scholars. These adults are 55 and older who complete an annual survey on health and wellness. The data can help students learn about aging. They volunteer for projects like research or service projects. They also participate in on-campus and educational events. The more I can mix students with older adults, the happier I am. I also operate an inter-professional wellness center at Westbrook housing. It is one of Maine's largest premier public housing authorities specializing in older adult housing. We are currently on summer break, but during the academic year, we see people for free dental care, provide social work services, including support groups, case management and consultation on benefits. We do fall and balance risk screening, educational programming of different types, typically linking students across disciplines, so it's a very active place. We just celebrated our first year there, so this coming academic year, I expect it to grow further.

KC: Can you tell me what healthful aging is? What is it and how is it done? How does one do that?

TM: Well, I like the word healthful versus healthy, because I like the connotation of full... I think that successful aging involves health broadly defined, so a fullness of health could be a sense of personal well-being,

meaning and purpose. You can have those senses and yet have a condition that limits you to a wheelchair. You can still be healthful in the grand scheme of things, and very few people make it to their 80s without some real challenges. Healthful aging is both acknowledging the realities of aging, but making the most of what you do have and finding pleasure and meaning in life.

KC: What are some of the specific areas that you focus on in order to be healthful?

TM: Children born today in Maine have an average life expectancy of 78 years, and ideally we want life expectancy to line up with a concept called health span. We want people to live their fullest healthful life right up until near the point of death. Right now, we have a gap, and this is true for older adults in Maine, as most other places in the United States. We, from a technology perspective, have the ability to restart hearts, treat cancers, lower cholesterol, do lots of things that will help a person have a long life in number of years, but still, most people have declining quality of health and declining quality of life for a period of years before they die.

KC: What are the key areas of health span that you focus on for older people?

TM: Some aspects of how long we might live and how healthful we might live are beyond our control. Our genetics, for example. One's own parents can provide a kind of marker for one's own longevity. If your parents live into their 90s, the chances are relatively good you probably will too, unless there's some unexpected events that happen. The two most common causes of death in the state of Maine for older adults are cancer and heart disease. Certain cancers, there's not much you can do to avoid them unless you simply get some regular screening. Others, like skin cancer, there are things you might be able to do to help prevent and treat it. Part of it is understanding what you can and can't control and making choices in your daily life that can support healthful longevity. As we age, we know that maintaining strong social ties is really important. People who are married or partnered will live longer than those that are single, and that's been established in the literature for a long time. Strong social ties are

really important for longevity.

Exercise is another thing that's very helpful. Anything to get the heart pumping and to promote personal fitness is a good thing. We tend to think about conditions like Alzheimer's disease as a factor that we can't control. It's true, except avoiding behaviors like smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, those kinds of things that can damage the brain. Living a long life is both avoiding the impacts of disease while embracing things that bring you joy, meaning and purpose.

KC: What are some of the challenges that you see for Maine, being the oldest in the nation, and how do you see the state of Maine supporting the kind of initiatives that your center is researching and advocating?

TM: My center is very much focused on engaging older adults to teach health professional students about aging. The goal is that graduates of our institution can be more age-aware, age-inclusive and age-understanding in the work that they do in the future. That's really our goal. The challenges in Maine are huge for successful aging. There's a lot of pressure on us with respect to actually depressing our life expectancy. If anything, some of us will live less long lives unless we tackle some of these big challenges. And what are those? We're an economically challenged state. We don't have the kind of resource base that others do to be able to bring state-level resources to bear, we're in a terrible housing crisis, and that cuts across all age groups. We don't have enough nursing homes, assisted living and even independent low-income apartments available in the state right now. Climate change is going to impact longevity across the United States - the Gulf of Maine, is one of the fastest warming areas. On the positive side, we have a great healthcare system in the state. We're fortunate to be a national leader in the age-friendly community movement. These are grassroots efforts from local individuals, but guided by some principles through AARP and some national bodies.

We have a lot of people stepping up to help each other, and it's not just people looking to the government or the big healthcare systems. I think that's one of the positives about living in Maine and why a lot of people want to retire here, because of that strong sense of community spirit. I do worry about the economics

of aging here. I just don't know what happens to the people that don't have financial means. Basically, they absorb care within the family, and they do the best that they can. I think we're sadly seeing a return to how we cared for older adults over a century ago in the family, because there are no other options, and that's a real challenge.

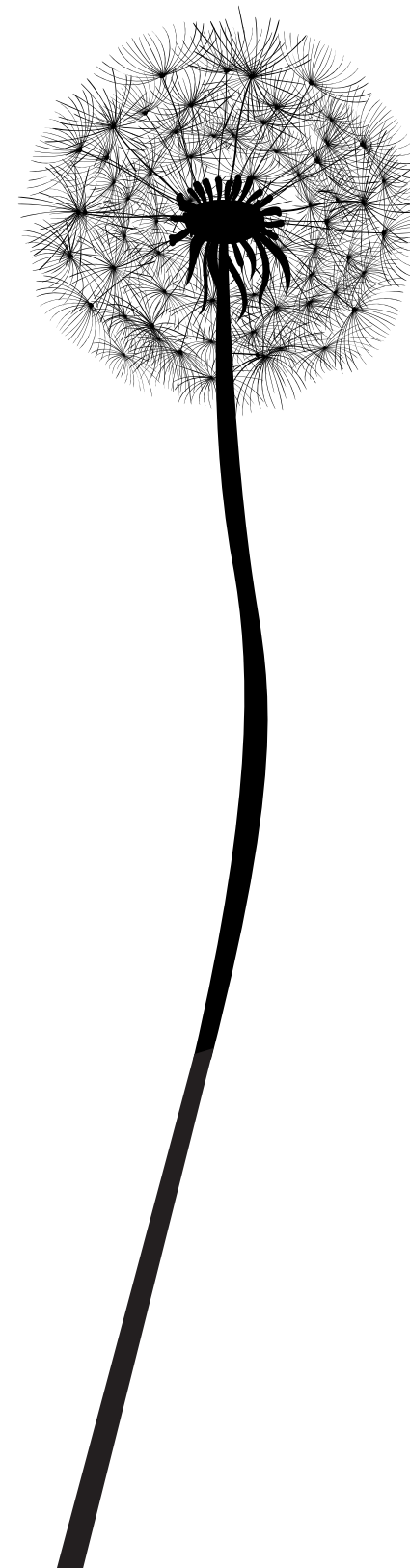
KC: You work with young professionals. Do you get a sense of hope through the work that you do?

TM: I do for many reasons. A lot of my work is addressing negative stereotypes and behaviors towards a belief that older people can't do things. One of the goals I have, and this is shared by many of my colleagues at UNE, is to allow our students to see what true aging is, mostly healthy, capable, and active. A relatively small proportion of older adults, less than 10%, are persons that are receiving significant healthcare services and may be quite frail or debilitated from disease. The majority aren't. One of my goals is to help people see the full range to combat biased views that can limit older adults. I would say many older adults are ageist toward themselves, so it's addressing that as well. You can do more than you think.

KC: So, in closing, what are some things you emphasize to move towards healthful aging?

TM: It's so easy just to give the platitudes, the common sense stuff. If you have a cup that is half full versus a cup that is half empty, attitude makes a big difference. We know that people who are subject to stress, high cortisol and other stress hormones, are bad for healthful aging. Finding ways to relax, to find meaning in your daily life, to interact socially with people you care about, to do something for others that matters. These are the things that are going to allow you to live those final years of your life as healthfully as you can be, even with the limitations you might have. It is so common for aging adults to get stuck in the doctor appointment cycle, constantly going to one specialist after another after another, and so much of your life can become focused on what's not working. A big part of healthful aging is changing one's attitude, and that can be hard because that's not something that we Americans do well. We tend to be all or none kind of people, and

I think embracing healthful aging is actually filling in the gray area of life. It's understanding that it's not all of this or all of that, and that's what makes getting older meaningful.



Become a Legacy Scholar

INVITATION

The Center for Excellence in Aging & Health invites adults, aged 55+ years, from Maine and elsewhere, to join with our students, faculty and staff in shared scholarship and service in support of healthy, meaning filled aging.

LEGACY SCHOLARS

Legacy Scholars are willing to participate as subjects in research studies on healthful aging. What's asked will vary by study. One study might involve an online survey or telephone interview. Another might include activities or tests on the UNE campus. Scholars choose the studies they wish to support.

COMMITMENT

Serving as a Legacy Scholar involves volunteering for at least one research study in a given 3 year period. Time commitments can vary from a few hours per year to a few hours per week based on individual preference.

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