



The Rotarian Conversation: Marc Freedman

This longevity expert has found that both younger and older people thrive when they work together with a common purpose — something Rotarians know a lot about

While visiting a Rotary club in Sacramento, California, **Marc Freedman** was struck by the diversity of the group — in age as well as ethnicity. “There were so many barriers being bridged around this common sense of purpose,” he says. “It’s one of the reasons I love Rotary. So much of society has sorted itself into highly age-segregated arrangements. Rotary and other like-minded groups are resisting that trend and creating spaces where people of all generations can work together for the greater good.”

Freedman is the kind of person who would notice that. Named a Social Entrepreneur of the Year by the World Economic Forum in 2014 and featured by *AARP the Magazine* in 2012 among its “50 over 50” influencers, he is one of the leading experts in the United States on the longevity revolution and the transformation of retirement.

Freedman is founder and CEO of [Encore.org](https://www.encore.org), a nonprofit focused on bridging generational divides and making “encore careers” for retirement-age workers a new social norm. He’s also co-founder of what is now AARP Experience Corps, a program that brings volunteer tutors age 50 and over together with students in kindergarten through third grade who are struggling to read. Researchers have found that the support of these volunteers has a beneficial effect on the children

equivalent to a 40 percent reduction in class size; referrals for behavior problems have also gone down 30 to 50 percent. There are advantages for the adults as well; studies have found that the volunteers experienced physical benefits such as less arthritis pain and better blood sugar control. The program, a 2014 *Atlantic* article noted, “dusted off the cobwebs in their brains.”

Freedman, who lives in the San Francisco Bay area, spoke with senior staff writer **Diana Schoberg** about his most recent book, *How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting the Generations*.

THE ROTARIAN: What do connections across generations provide that connections within your own age group don't?

FREEDMAN: There's a growing appreciation of connections in general these days, fostered by the awareness of how profound the problem of loneliness is in America and elsewhere. People need a variety of connections — with their peers as well as across generations.

A Harvard study found that relationships are the key to happiness throughout adulthood. It shows that older people who connect with younger people are three times as likely to be happy as those who fail to do so. Why is that bond so important? One reason is that as we reach the time in our lives when there are fewer years ahead of us than behind us, it's a great comfort to know that what we've learned is likely to live on in younger friends and family members.

TR: What are the benefits of these relationships for children?

FREEDMAN: On an emotional level, the needs of older and younger people fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. When I started my career, I spent years working on kids' issues. I didn't have any background in aging or gerontology. But I was struck by how important the presence of caring adults is for the well-being of young people, particularly young people who are growing up in economic hardship.

Urie Bronfenbrenner, who was one of the great child psychologists of the 20th century and who co-founded Head Start, was asked what he had learned from decades of studying children's development. He said that every child needs at least one adult to be irrationally crazy about them. I think he captured something fundamental. Young people need love and support from adults — not just from their own parents, but from other adults in the community. And as we get older, we also need to be irrationally crazy about young people. It's a key source of happiness, according to research, and it's something that we get better at as we age. The skills that are required to build and sustain relationships blossom in later life, as do emotional regulation and even the drive to connect.

TR: In your book, you write about the physical benefits of these kinds of connections, such as decreased rates of diabetes and arthritis in older people. What are some other benefits that might be surprising?

FREEDMAN: I was involved in creating Experience Corps, a national service program that recruits older people to serve in low-income elementary schools, helping kids learn to read. One of the discoveries we've made along the way is that this intersection between purpose and connection is incredibly important for well-being, especially as we grow older.

We found with Experience Corps that having responsibility and a place to go several days a week forces older people to be more physically active — they have to get out of their homes and to the schools. And purposeful activity, particularly with young people, involves a lot of learning. Explaining and teaching things to younger people helps keep older people's minds active. There is now research from Johns Hopkins University that suggests being involved in programs like Experience Corps can offset some of the things that predispose people to dementia.

And then there's our spiritual health — the idea that we're living a life that still matters, rather than heeding signals from society that older people should head prematurely to the sidelines.

TR: How has our ability to connect with each other been affected by the social distancing that COVID-19 has required?

FREEDMAN: Social distancing has exacerbated the loneliness epidemic, which is also a public health crisis, contributing to millions of “deaths of despair” globally every year. But this period of sheltering at home helps us all develop a deeper empathy for those who are isolated most of the time. Suddenly, many millions of people are experiencing the kind of loneliness that had been reserved for much smaller numbers.

When social distancing ends, I believe we'll have a newfound appreciation for face-to-face connection. Sure, we've learned to use tools like Zoom, FaceTime, and Google Hangouts — and they help. But we'll also see that virtual connection is no substitute for the real thing.

TR: Is our society more segregated by age than it used to be? If so, how did that come about?

FREEDMAN: It happened in waves. In the United States, the first wave came during the Progressive era, as we enacted child labor laws and universal schooling. All of a sudden, young people were grouped together in educational institutions entirely geared to them. Social Security had the effect of getting older people out of the workforce, which in turn helped create a whole set of institutions geared toward older people. It was all seen as being a more efficient way to organize society.

None of that happened for nefarious reasons. We just thought it was going to be more efficient to put children in schools and to get older people into settings where we felt we could more effectively address their needs, like senior centers and nursing homes and retirement communities. Then we were left with workplaces occupied by all the adults in the middle. And the twain stopped meeting. For all the benefits, something profound — an essential part of the human experience — was lost along the way.

In 1949, United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther got up in front of the union and described retirees as too old to work, too young to die. People were

ashamed to be elderly. So real estate developers created places for them to go where they would be apart from the rest of society and wouldn't have to deal with that stigma. They could pretend they were young in a society that glorifies youth. In retirement communities like Sun City, Arizona, everybody was old, so nobody was old. You could pretend you were a kid again. The weekend Sun City opened, 100,000 people showed up. There was a traffic jam for 2 miles.

What we're seeing now is a wave of social innovation that's essentially trying to find new ways to do old things. And that's terrific. But Rotary has been doing it all along. That's an extraordinary credit to the organization. It is among the few places in American society where older and younger people can come together to work for the common good. It's a place where people get a sense of the cycle of life and some relief from this radical age segregation that has been so prevalent for the past century.

TR: Is age segregation a problem in other parts of the world as well?

FREEDMAN: It's a global issue, and there is a global community of innovators who are working to bring generations together and to create societies where what's natural is once again normal.

Probably the most ambitious effort is in Singapore, where the government is spending over \$2 billion on an aging action plan, including creating a "Kampong for All Ages"—*kampong* being the Malay word for village. New senior centers and preschools are being situated together. New intergenerational housing is being designed. They're building playgrounds that are designed to bring older and younger people together. They've created a volunteer corps of older people focused on helping children. They are trying to reorganize society to demonstrate that the generations can not only get along; they can be invaluable to each other.

One of my favorite examples is happening in the United Kingdom. At age 57, Lucy Kellaway, a columnist at the *Financial Times*, announced that she was going to quit her job to become a math teacher in a low-income London school. She was inspired by her daughter, who was in the British equivalent of Teach for

America. Kellaway challenged her readers of a certain age to quit their jobs and join her as math and science teachers, and 1,000 people signed up for what she calls Now Teach. It has really affected how older people in the UK think about their future.

In Finland, an effort to create “communal grandparents” came out of the realization that many grandparents and their grandchildren do not live near each other. And many older people don’t have their own grandchildren. So they had the idea of creating grandparent/grandchild-like bonds among people who aren’t related to each other.

These experiments are part of an attempt to rethink relationships between older and younger people in a world that is aging rapidly. In the United States, 2019 was the first year that we had more people over 60 than under 18, and that trend is going to continue. We need to think about how to organize society in ways that not only mitigate the challenges of these new demographics, but take advantage of some of the opportunities they present.

TR: What can Rotarians do to promote connections between the generations?

FREEDMAN: There are opportunities for older and younger people to come together around projects that benefit the future well-being of humanity. Young people have an interest in that, because that’s the world they’re going to inhabit. And as we get older and come face to face with our own mortality, one of the central ways to address the fact that we don’t live on and on is to help create a better future.

I know from reading and seeing the projects that Rotary is working on — like climate change and water issues — that many of the priorities that are core to Rotary’s social mission are ones that older and younger people can come together around and bring their unique skills to help address.

TR: How can we create programs that bring generations together to the greatest effect?

FREEDMAN: Establish programs that create the opportunity to build real relationships through working together around a shared purpose. Ongoing, consistent, and mutual efforts are going to have the biggest payoff.

Opportunities for older Rotarians to work with young people on issues of high priority to Rotary and its members will offer some of the deepest rewards.

TR: If you could create a world where relationships between people of different generations are the best they could be, what would that look like?

FREEDMAN: We would have to reorganize our daily life in ways that prize cross-generational proximity and purpose. One example is to create age-integrated housing. Another is to bring together institutions currently aimed at separate age groups into mutually beneficial collaboration, such as preschools combined with senior centers. We would need to encourage people of different ages to be in the workplace together, and we would have to reassess the nature of education. There is a movement on university campuses where people in their 60s and 70s are coming back to school in programs designed to help them launch the next phase of their lives. One of the great side benefits is that they generate interaction between older people and the young people they take classes with.

One of the stories I told in the book still has a grip on me. It's an example from Judson Manor in Cleveland, an upscale retirement community in a beautiful 1920s building near the Case Western Reserve University campus. Judson started housing graduate students in music and art for free in return for the students' performing concerts and doing art projects with the residents. The exchange ended up producing extraordinary cross-generational relationships. When a young violist who spent time living at Judson got married, for example, she asked her 90-something neighbor to be in their wedding party. They had formed a deep bond. Proximity and purpose yet again! When you create those kinds of opportunities, very powerful things start happening.

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