

Creative Aging and the “Existential Crack”

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Wendy L. Miller and Gene D. Cohen. (2016). *Sky Above Clouds: Finding Our Way Through Creativity, Aging, and Illness*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 316 pp., \$27.95 (paper).

Anyone familiar with Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem” and its line, “there is a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in,” will recognize a metaphor used by Wendy Miller and Gene Cohen in their book, *Sky Above Clouds*. They talk about the “existential crack” through which not only light but also the darkness of vulnerability enters human lives. As Miller states, “It’s as if a crack has opened in the landscape, exposing strata that have always been there but have never been part of life’s landscape on the surface” (p. 67).

For Miller and Cohen, the crack came from Gene’s diagnosis of metastatic prostate cancer in 1996. This occurred two years after they adopted their daughter and just before they got married. Gene lived for thirteen more years, a time of great creativity for both of them as he published two important books (*The Creative Age* and *The Mature Mind*) and conducted the Creativity and Aging Study, while Wendy sculpted, painted, and continued her practice as an expressive arts therapist.

Sky Above Clouds weaves together many stories, metaphors, and themes. The title comes from a series of paintings Georgia O’Keefe created when she was in her 70s. O’Keefe said she feared flying, but the knowledge that there is always sky above the clouds gave her courage not only to board airplanes but also to live creatively with aging and illness. Gene adopted this metaphor and often spoke about it in his public talks. Eventually, a friend gave him an umbrella depicting blue sky above fluffy white clouds, an umbrella he often opened for audiences as a way of demonstrating a powerful new metaphor for aging. Undoubtedly some readers of this review can recall Gene standing on a stage holding this umbrella over his halo of curly hair, twinkling eyes, happy smile, and, of course, his ever-present bowtie. For those who never had the pleasure of encountering Gene Cohen and his passionate case for creative aging, this book provides a multilayered tale of the lived experience of the new story about aging many contemporary gerontologists are trying to convey. It is a story about both light and darkness viewed through the existential crack that opens in later life when people wrestle with reconciling despair and hope, loss and gain, and frailty and strength.

To appreciate the tapestry created by the stories, metaphors, and themes of this book, it is important to understand how it was constructed. Originally planned as a coauthored work intended to be published while Gene was alive, the book retains Gene’s voice by using italics to incorporate his professional observations about his work on creativity and

aging, along with his reflections on his journey through the medical labyrinth, some of his dreams, and even a portion of a fairy tale he wrote for his young daughter. Wendy, along with her friend and cowriter Teresa Barker, who had earlier assisted Gene in writing *The Creative Age* (2000) and *The Mature Mind* (2005), incorporated materials from Wendy’s journals kept during Gene’s illness, reflections on therapeutic encounters with her clients, insights from studying the works of various psychologists and psychoneuroimmunologists, and, finally, descriptions of her life after Gene’s death.

To begin, this is a story about cancer. Anyone who has had cancer, loved someone with cancer, or treated someone with cancer, especially in its metastatic form, will identify with much of what Gene and Wendy experienced in the thirteen-year span between his diagnosis and death. Like many people, he hated getting unasked-for advice. Trained as a geriatric psychiatrist and having a life-long commitment to the joys and rigors of science, Gene was acutely sensitive to the ways people project their own fears and fantasies onto people with cancer.

One issue someone with Gene’s reputation and career must face is the question of “to tell or not to tell.” He had many professional commitments of research, teaching, writing, and speaking, and mostly he chose not to tell so that people would not narrowly view him through the cancer lens. He was gaining renown in that time because of the new paradigm he was introducing into gerontology, arguing that aging is a time for creativity and that creativity enables people to access and express their potential. The ideas he presented in *The Creative Age* and *The Mature Mind* about what he called “developmental intelligence” excited many people in gerontology who were acquiring insights into gains wrought by brain changes in later life when the two hemispheres work more in synchrony. The Creativity and Aging Study, using an experimental design with a control group, showed how artist-led creative engagement group activities could improve a number of measures of physical and mental health (Cohen, 2006; Cohen, Perlstein, Chapline, Kelly, First, & Simmens, 2006). It was a very exciting, break-out time in gerontology, and Gene was in the middle of it. He was living fully and creatively, all the while dealing with “the numbers” given to him by his doctors.

Some of these doctors failed to get the message Gene was spreading far and wide: hope and expectation need not disappear when the “dark dips” into terror come along. Hope and despair, like the gains and losses of aging, can be held in creative tension, a lesson Wendy had learned well from her Jungian

studies. One of the most devastating “dark dips” came after Gene had outlived the median expectation for survival with metastatic prostate cancer. A physician told him, “Medically you do not exist.” In other words, he was an outlier and his physicians had no idea what to do with him. This was especially troubling to him as a physician who understood how profoundly affected patients are by their doctors’ views of them and their illnesses. Some of his doctors were ill-equipped to understand that serious illnesses can evoke healing creativity and a sense of spirituality that affords access to deep currents of meaning coursing beneath the “existential cracks.”

Gene and Wendy believed creativity could shape a life of meaning and purpose. Despite the suffering wrought by the cancer, both experienced how creativity enabled them to tap into their positive potential. Wendy continued to make art throughout Gene’s illness, much of which is presented in this book in the form of black-and-white photographs (although readers like me might long to have a website where they could see this work in color and even in 3-dimensional, rotational renderings). Gene’s creativity was expressed through his engagement in science, literature, music, and art. It also burst into the world through the games he developed, including his patented redesign of a cribbage board that made it easier for people with motor and visual impairments to play the game.

An important expression of creativity reverberating throughout this book, starting with its title, comes from the use of metaphors that perform a kind of alchemy combining cognitions and emotions. Metaphors can work negatively and positively to construct our views of the world. Susan Sontag (1977) famously called out those who used cancer metaphors to depict evil, thus afflicting those suffering with cancer illnesses with images of enemies and warfare. Gene was irritated with how the medical community had retained the metaphor of the “cancer battle” and was distraught by the way it reinforced the separation of the clinical (the war on the bone cancer) from the personal (the cancer in Gene’s bones). Similar critiques are appearing today in discussions of the war metaphors associated with Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia (George, 2010; Johnstone, 2011; Zeilig, 2013).

On the other hand, metaphors play a crucial role in gerontology. Aging is such a multifaceted phenomenon that we need metaphors to guide our quest for its meanings (see Kenyon, Birren, & Schroots, 1991). As Wendy wrote, “Our psyche finds ways to give us the metaphors and images that we need to both sustain us and guide us” (p. 235). One metaphor used often by Wendy to describe her work as an expressive arts therapist and Gene’s work as a research scientist is the “creative detective.” Older people do not need to be trained therapists or scientists to be creative detectives because that metaphor works well to describe the search for positive potential in later life in whatever form it might take. To use another metaphor from this book, Gene Cohen offered elders—and all of us—a new mirror for viewing aging and for seeing ourselves in a new way.

Through the saga of their thirteen years living in “illness time,” as Wendy called it, both she and Gene understood that healing could coexist with a fatal diagnosis. For them, healing meant coming together as whole persons by aligning body, mind, and spirit. Healing not only occurred for them as individuals, and as a couple greatly in love, but it also came to them through the love of family and friends. Wendy’s description of Gene’s last days and the loving care others gave them is a profound witness to the kind of healing that can accompany dying. In so many ways, this is a book about friendship—between husband and wife, and with family members of different ages, new friends and long-time friends, and professional colleagues. This latter form of friendship is vividly portrayed through the blurbs, advance praise quotations, and the remarkably lengthy lists of persons in the personal acknowledgements and professional acknowledgements sections.

Gene Cohen touched many people’s lives and planted seeds of transformation for the work of gerontologists. He opened an “existential crack” in a field often closed to the arts and humanities, enabling aging persons and people who study aging persons to see that darkness does not extinguish light and that frailty does not eliminate strength. He provided scientific support for and personal testimony about the power of engagement with the arts in all forms and openness to creative living. His legacy continues in the work of organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Center for Creative Aging, and TimeSlips, Inc., all of which bring artists and researchers together to demonstrate the healing power of creativity in later life.

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Susan McFadden’s current areas of study include dementia-friendly communities and predictors of comfort with persons having dementia. She chairs the board of directors of TimeSlips, Inc. and is involved with local efforts to infuse the arts into dementia care. Her most recent book is Aging Together: Dementia, Friendship, and Flourishing Communities, published by the Johns Hopkins University Press.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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