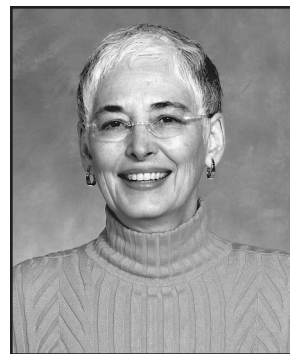


# Our Guest Editors

*Talk about  
religion, spirituality, and  
meaning in later life.*



SUSAN H. MCFADDEN

Surveys of older adults reveal that religion and spirituality can be an important source of strength for facing the challenges of aging, as people who work with elders already know. They also know that later life raises or emphasizes existential questions, about meaning, loss, love, death, for older people and their families—and for professionals in aging. Still, these topics remain difficult to discuss, often even taboo, as our guest editors note. For a much-needed conversation about religion, spirituality, and meaning in later life, *Generations* presents Susan McFadden and Rabbi Cary Kozberg, who have been at the forefront of efforts in the field to address the significance and practical implications of these concerns.

Susan McFadden is professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin. She holds a Ph.D. in psychology and religion and a master's degree in experimental psychology. She says it was the kindness of older people that drew her to aging: "When I was in my twenties, my husband was a fledgling minister, and it was the old people in the new congregation who reached out to us." McFadden has since become the author or editor of nine books and more than thirty articles and chapters in the area of religion, spirituality, and emotion in later life. The core of her work has been bringing together researchers and practitioners around these topics, particularly through her leadership in the American Society on Aging, the Gerontological Society of America, and the American Psychological Association.

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the sciences," McFadden says (one of her current projects is a longitudinal study of the exploratory behaviors of rats), "but I've also got a strong humanities streak. I love fostering conversations among people in practice with those in these other disciplines. These days, everyone is so narrowly specialized, yet themes reverberate throughout.

"For example, for very practical reasons, people in service professions must be able to talk about religiousness and spirituality—to recognize that many of our clients locate the most profound sources of coping strength in their faith. We can see that as a resource and in some cases a burden. For good or ill, this is a significant part of many people's lives. There is a whole spectrum; we need to look carefully at how real people have responded."

Though bringing these professional groups together is a challenge, she has seen some wonderful changes, she says. "I've seen these issues move much more into the mainstream of gerontology. And on the science side, we're doing a much better job of research. We have better instruments—for example, we are more aware of our biases and can now better critically examine the possible effects." McFadden herself recently completed a year-long sabbatical during which she investigated the existential and spiritual concerns of people who have received the diagnosis of early-stage dementia. She also examined the responses of faith communities to this issue.

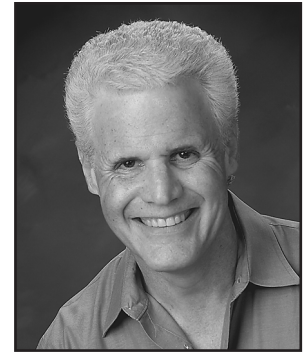
McFadden says she looks forward to an

upcoming meeting of the American Academy of Religion, which she will attend “from the science side,” hoping to spark conversations about religion in relation to disabilities and dementia. “There is so much to be gained for the benefit of older people.”

Rabbi Cary Kozberg also came serendipitously to the field of aging. Early in his career he took what he thought was a temporary position as spiritual advisor in a Jewish nursing home. “I thought I would stay at the most a year, until I found what I really wanted to do,” he says, “but I’ve been here for twenty years. The satisfaction of working with older people was an unexpected blessing.” Kozberg is director of spiritual life at Wexner Heritage Village in Columbus, Ohio, and holds a master’s degree in Hebrew Letters and Rabbinic Ordination. At Heritage Village, he creates and develops religious and spiritual programs for residents of all faiths, their families, and the staff. He has been a teacher in the Melton Adult Mini School since 1989, and his sermons, essays, and poetry have appeared in numerous publications.

As chair of the Forum on Religion and Spirituality, a constituency group of ASA, Kozberg has written, presented, and fostered multidisciplinary discussions about the spiritual challenges that face older adults and their families. “I thank ASA and FORSA,” Kozberg says. “I see us as a prophetic voice that has been keeping elders on the radar screen—working to ensure that they are respected and not patronized.”

Kozberg, too, has been particularly drawn to his work with older people with dementia and their families, and says he sees how practitioners must be able to respond to the needs of the whole person who has dementia—including the realms of spirituality and meaning. “I’ve seen what practitioners must do, but working with



RABBI CARY KOZBERG

“Practitioners must be able to respond to the needs of the whole person.”

people with dementia has also broadened my own understanding of spirituality, of facing life,” Kozberg says.

“We can see that forgetfulness, for example, can be embraced as an instrument for getting in touch with different ways of knowing things and of being. Families I work with experience this too.” Kozberg says he sees particular challenges in the future in providing for the spiritual needs of baby boomers.

“The spiritual needs of this cohort are going to be all over the map,” he says. “Some will be very traditional and others will be interested in all kinds of new ways. Those who work with them will be challenged, but what is required is to listen openly, to be present, and to foster connection with family and surroundings, as I tell my staff today. The truth is, spirituality isn’t simply one part of caregiving—it’s the foundation of it. Working with older people, in very subtle ways you touch and are touched by the human spirit. From elders, I’ve learned how to grow old myself. ☺

—Mary Johnson