Awaken Your AgePotential, Exploring Chosen Paths of Thrivers

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Lori Campbell, a gerontologist, qualitative researcher, and entrepreneur, writes the book, *Awaken Your AgePotential, Exploring Chosen Paths of Thrivers*, as an expert in wellness and aging. She has coined the term *AgePotential*, a concept intended to closely associate age with ideas of growth and possibility. Similar to other visionaries who have used metaphors to shift societal views about aging (e.g., Dychtwald, 1999; Wallace, 1999), this book was written to motivate readers to think of aging as an opportunity and work towards a cultural shift in how people behave as they age. The book introduces key ideas and action steps, provides examples of success stories, and concludes with a call to action to embrace the ideals of the book.

Campbell begins the book by describing differences between thriving older adults (thrivers) and non-thrivers. In gerontological literature, thriving has been described as a concept that exists on a continuum. Along the continuum, “individuals grow and develop at different rates and in different ways based on interactions with the environment and the ongoing development of self” (Haight, Barba, Tesh, & Courts, 2002, p. 15). In the book, thrivers are described as individuals who have endured similar pain, loss, and hardship as others but are different in the way they choose to perceive and respond to the world. Thrivers believe they can influence how they age by taking responsibility for their health and choosing to live passionate, goal-driven lives. In contrast, non-thrivers have succumbed to societal stereotypes of aging and society’s preoccupation with youth. They
take a passive approach to aging and often die with untapped talent and unlived potential. Through her research and personal experience, Campbell argues that she has identified Generation AgePotential, “a group of people of mixed ages who are redefining what it means to age by taking ownership of their lives, embracing their chronological age by reimagining their psychological age, seeing a potential to make a difference, and capitalizing on that opportunity” (p. 8), and these individuals can serve as role models for others with the ultimate goal being a dramatic shift in how society grows older.

Connecting her concepts to research, Campbell includes information from various research studies and technical reports as well as quotes from doctors, scientists, and other identified experts. The author incorporates scientific and biological terms and defines them in a way that quickly and clearly conveys the meanings in a practical way, leaving the message that “you are the #1 influence in your aging journey.” The book emphasizes how thought processes and perceptions influence health decisions (e.g., nutrition, stress management) and long-term outcomes (e.g., disease, illness); however, the incorporation of information on the role of psychiatric conditions is lacking. The information culminates in two equations for thriving in later life that combines the terms life experience, wisdom, possibility, awareness, and action. The third, and arguably most convincing chapter reiterates the term AgePotential and discusses the four principles for becoming a thriver. These include: demonstrate personal responsibility, question limited thinking, cultivate a mindful, proactive approach, and create a passion-centered life. Campbell outlines essential action steps and provides some helpful suggestions for what it takes to change one’s thinking and behavior. The lengthy introduction to the key ideas builds up to the Thriver Profiles that have been alluded to throughout the book.
The Thriver Profiles includes stories from the words of ten identified thrivers mostly from the Minnesota area, with brief commentaries from Campbell connecting the stories to the key ideas outlined in the book. These inspiring individuals include five women and five men whose chronological age ranges from 53-87 (one woman reports her age as forever young at “39”). The stories discuss critical life experiences and moments that shaped each person’s life. Important to the themes of the book, these stories also discuss how the thrivers chose to think about these events and identify new goals and activities throughout their lives that have kept them active and engaged. For example, Laurie lost multiple family members, including her husband, in a short period of time. She discusses finding “gain in pain” and is now able to feel more deeply and genuinely and with greater empathy for others. She has gone on to become a national and international trainer in education, and her story of resilience is motivation for those who experience significant loss in life.

The stories do weave in moments of challenge and despair in each individual’s life story, which helps make them believable and easier to connect to real life. A critique of the profiles would be the lack of information about financial difficulties, with the exception of the story of Fran who was raised in a family that struggled to put food on the table. Though described as easily relatable, some of the incredible goals attained (e.g., motivational speaker traveling across the country, world record holder, company CEO, book author) come across as less accessible due to the lack of information about the individuals’ life circumstances, including socioeconomic status, education, and racial/ethnic background. The individuals in the stories are endearing, and biographies and even contact information for the individuals is provided at the end of the book.
Older adults and gerontological social workers may find the book a useful addition to their libraries, as the book seems to serve a dual purpose of self-help and call to action. Some of the thriver profiles could potentially serve as helpful resources for those in working in therapeutic roles. The book lacks information on the author’s education, training, and experiences, which would help professionals understand the author’s perspective in writing the book. Further, information about the methodology used in gathering the information from the thrivers, specifically sampling and analytic techniques, is needed to identify targeted groups of older adults who may particularly benefit from the book and to replicate the study empirically. The book is inspirational and motivational, and Campbell challenges individuals at any age to make changes towards being a thriver. The AgePotential concept, if further developed, could offer a new aging metaphor to contrast recent negative associations (Barusch, 2013).

References


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