



## "Creative aging" ~ Health benefits of elderly art activities ~

2017.07.25 Journalist Takeshi

Yabe

In the United States and more recently in Europe, elderly people have maintained their health and increased their sense of happiness through creative art activities such as theater, dance, chorus and painting. Many research studies show that elderly participation in art activities has health benefits. In other words, by living creatively, it is possible to reduce the amount of medicine used and the number of hospital visits, increase social connections, and have greater meaning and purpose in life.

Regarding the theatrical activities of the elderly, I also wrote a column earlier ("Senior theater is funny because it is interesting!" December 28, 2015), about the Stagebridge Theater. The founder, Dr. Stuart Kandell, left his theatre management four years ago and is currently conducting research on the art activities of the elderly at the University of California.

Mr. Kandell stayed in Japan for about two months from the beginning of May as part of the overseas Fulbright Grant, participated in an international conference and interviewed elderly artists. I met with Mr. Kandell in the Izakaya in Tokyo and heard about the outcome in Japan and "creative aging" that he advocates.

**Yabe:** Elderly people have been advocating "creative aging" that can enhance the quality of life, health, and happiness through art activities, please tell us a little more.

**Stuart Kandell:** In 1978, I established Stagebridge for the elderly in Oakland, California. There, we offer more than 30 classes such as acting, dance, singing, improvisation, and storytelling (to make stories based on individual thoughts and experience). These art activities not only improve the body but also activate the brain's work. Since then, a lot of theatrical schools and theater companies for elderly people were created in the United States.

Many research studies show that art activities have health benefits. Drama improves the cognitive function of elderly people, and dance helps alleviate symptoms and prevent Parkinson's disease. At a dance studio in New York, a professional dancer teaches dance to patients with Parkinson's disease. Also, storytelling and dance are effective in treating Alzheimer's disease.

The elderly art activity brings a positive effect to other generations. For example, if you look at a 100-year-old artist in Stagebridge, she is still drawing, singing, painting and acting, I think that young people can have good images and hope for getting older. At an international conference of Tohoku University I participated in May, I talked about such a story.



Mr. Kandell speaking at Tohoku University's "Smart Aging" international conference

**Yabe:** What do you think about "positive aging" and "anti-aging" often said lately?

**Kandell:** I think that there is no need to grasp excessively positive or negative stereotypes. I interact with various generations from young people to the elderly, but

I always honestly say my actual age. I do not think I will appear young by dyeing or increasing my hair. Age is just a number and I think that it does not make a big sense for itself.

I am 68 years old, but when I challenge something I feel like a 16 year old boy. And this morning I felt like an 80 year old. I climbed Mt. Fuji on the weekend and the muscles in my body were painful and my body did not move as well as I expected. But when I stood at the top of Mt. Fuji it was awesome and climbing is a challenge for me.



Place where you come down near the top of Mt. Fuji

I think there is a culture that praises youth excessively as a background for words such as "positive aging" and "anti-aging". Especially in the United States it is popular. Many people want to act young, want to be young, to appear young. But what matters is not to look young, but to act your age. We need to create a society where all elderly people can challenge what they want to do at any given age.

**Yabe:** I heard that you also interacted with graduate students at Tohoku University in Sendai.

**Kandell:** We conducted a seminar for 20 graduate students studying gerontology and elderly supportive studies. I wanted to know how they thought about aging. So I asked them what they wanted to do towards the end of their life and what were their dreams of their "old age". They did not reply much. It may be difficult in a society where it is not customary to express private thoughts, But it is important to think about your own aging and how you would like it to be.

I have allowed my creative passion to guide my life and I talked about experiences of making a theater school for the elderly. At that time (in 1978), the health effects of the creative arts were little known. But I wrote letters to elderly related foundations and businesses, sent videos showing the theatrical classes and students and invited them to see our work. Through these activities, we became gradually known within the area, and students and donations began to increase.

**Yabe:** How were your interviews with elderly artists in Japan?

**Kandell:** I talked to 25 elderly artists and it was a very powerful and profound experience for me. In Sendai, I met artists in their 60s to 80s who are doing painting, theater, dance, musical instruments, songs, calligraphy, etc. A woman who was 74 began painting at age 58 after raising children and now she has a new career. She had been interested in drawing since she was a child, but didn't have the time for it while raising a family. Even though her home (in Sendai) and her daughter's home (in



Fukushima) suffered great damage in the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, she was moved to create a painting of the earthquake and tsunami and exhibited at a recent exhibition.

Kandell with 88-year-old Japanese dancer whose face is painted white

I interviewed an 88-year-old female Butoh dancer who is internationally known. A man in his 60s from Okinawa sings Okinawa folk songs several times a week and cooks at an Okinawan restaurant in Sendai. He has published several books

about Okinawan culture and is working on a dictionary of Okinawan language that is being lost. In Kyoto I met a 88-year-old sumi painter who lived in the United States for a long time and was fluent in English. He showed me pictures of his work in churches, temples, shrines, etc, and gave me a one of his pictures.

Half of the artists I interviewed were people who started art since becoming older, and half were professionals who had done art all their lives. However, what they all

have in common is that they have a very special creative space to work in that is transcendent.

Everyone welcomed me with great hospitality and interest. The reason is I think that they want to tell their stories, particularly to someone who understands the artistic process and is also an older person. Apart from the professional artists, those who started art since becoming older do not have as many opportunities. I would like to launch a program or website that introduces the work and profiles of these elderly artists. Then, their wonderful works will be known to many people. I think that art councils and related organizations supporting the elderly would be interested.

**Yabe:** You've traveled all around Japan.

**Kandell:** From Tokyo I went to Sendai, the Northern Alps, Hida Takayama, Kyoto, and the island of Yakushima from Kagoshima. The underwater hot spring in Yakushima was incredibly wonderful. It is surrounded by the lava released by the volcanic eruption in the sea and it is possible to take a bath only at the time of low tide. It was as if it was in a fantasy. I've been to many hot springs but this is my first time to experience anything like this.



Enjoy cycling at Hida Takayama

Then I climbed Mt. Fuji. I went to the 2300 meters (station 5) by bus, and it took about 4 hours and a half to climb to the summit. I took a rest at a mountain hut on the way and arrived at the summit around 3:30 in the morning and waited until around 5 o'clock to see the sunrise. But it was unfortunately cloudy and I could not see that day.



Climbing is a challenge for me and it is also a pleasure to realize the beauty of nature. However, it is quite demanding for anyone, especially elderly people. I would not recommend it to those who are not confident in physical fitness or those who have no experience. Two years ago in Nepal, I climbed a mountain of 6000 meters, which is much higher than Mount Fuji.

**Yabe:** You seem confident about physical strength, is it also the result of art activities such as tango?

**Kandell:** Maybe so. Besides tango, I also do yoga and used to practice aikido. Tango and aikido are common in that they always have flexibility so that the balance of the body can be taken. Aikido assumes a case where multiple opponents attack at the same time and you practice to move the body instantaneously. In tango you have to be balanced so you can share the weight and balance of your partner.

Also, in Aikido you practice a safe way of falling that will not hurt. This relates to everyday life, recovering from losing a job, or a partner for example. As I get older there is more loss and it becomes more difficult to get back up. That is why it is important to make your mind and body flexible so you can respond to various changes. For that purpose creative art activities that move the body while stimulating the brain are especially useful.



■ **Dr. Stuart Kandell** obtained a master's degree in theater from Newcastle University in the UK and a doctorate in intergenerational research at Union Institute University. In 1978, in Oakland, California, he founded the oldest performing arts center for the elderly "Stagebridge" and became a pioneer promoting senior theater and art. He left the operation of the school in 2013, and now is a researcher of the University of California, Berkeley in the Program for Medical Humanities where he conducts research on the art activities of elderly people. He has a variety of hobbies including Argentine Tango, Yoga, Cycling, and Mountain Climbing.

## Columnist profile



### **Takeshi Yabe journalist**

Born in Saitama prefecture in 1954. Completed Master's degree in Armstrong University graduate school. He moved to the USA in 1974. After "Los Angeles Times" paper Tokyo branch office reporter etc., I became freelance. Currently, while traveling back and forth between Japan and the United States, he continues to coverage and writing activities on the themes of elderly people, employment, health, social issues and others. He wrote in his book "How to live from the age of 60", "It is not solitary when dead alone ~" Independent death "developed country USA", "Human body influence of mobile electromagnetic waves", "Downstream elderly people who are happier than Japan" .