

## **Aging with Autonomy, Community, and Purpose at Park Tower: Ideas from Atul Gawande’s book, *Being Mortal***

*Pam Woll MA, CPS, long-time Park Tower resident*

### **Pre-Discussion Study Guide**

#### **Date, time, and Zoom Link:**

The Social Commission will host Pam Woll’s presentation, *Aging with Autonomy, Community and Purpose at Park Tower: Ideas from Atul Gawande’s book, “Being Mortal”* on Zoom.

Wednesday, October 21, 7 p.m.

Please see end of Study Guide for Zoom Connection information.

#### **Preparation for the discussion:**

- If you have time, you can read the book, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* by Atul Gawande (2014). (If you don’t, that’s okay too.)
- You might start by defining for yourself what autonomy, community, and purpose mean in your life.
- Then you might read farther on in this Study Guide and think about the questions and what your answers might be.

#### **1. Autonomy**

Atul Gawande, MD describes autonomy as being the “authors of our lives” (Steven Dworkin), according to our own character and loyalties.

##### **1a. Questions:**

- What activities or options might you ever prize—even above your safety—that make life worthwhile?
- Are there solutions to the problems of aging that might meet our individual safety needs—even if those needs have to be negotiated—and still honor what’s most important to each of us as an individual?
- Do we have the courage, ingenuity, and imagination to start thinking about those solutions while we still have the ability to plan and arrange for them—and to educate the people who might someday be making decisions for us?

In advancing age, some of the greatest enemies of autonomy are the body's many moves toward deteriorating and shutting down. One of our greatest allies can be someone trained in geriatrics, the rapidly disappearing medical specialty dedicated to anticipating and preventing as many of those moves as possible.

**1b. Questions:**

- What if we asked a geriatrician to come to Park Tower (or Zoom), to give a lecture/workshop on how we can educate ourselves about geriatric health and ways of sustaining our abilities, including:
  - Basic preventive and health-preserving things we should be doing
  - Things we should watch out for and do something about
  - Other health indicators we want to make sure we keep track of
  - How to be effective consumers of medical services and advocates for our own and our loved ones' health

**2. Community**

This might be a group of people living in the same place or sharing particular characteristics, or fellowship with others because of shared attitudes, interests, and/or goals.

**2. Questions:**

- What does "community" mean to you at this stage of your life? Do you see that changing as you get older? And if so, how?
- If you need extra assistance as you age, would you rather stay at Park Tower or go to a place where they specialize in providing that assistance?
- What kinds of assistance do people tend to need as they age. And which of these types of assistance might be provided in a community or a regular condo complex like Park Tower on an as-needed basis?
- How might this assistance be provided? What kinds of supervision and payment mechanisms might be tapped into, set up, or customized to give the people who need it this kind of flexibility? And what levels of investment and participation might be necessary to make these kinds of arrangements feasible?
- Would it make sense to research the Boston cooperative Beacon Hill Village (see Gawande's book), to determine its feasibility as a model or example for people at Park Tower who are interested? Who might help with this research?

### 3. Purpose

If autonomy makes you the “author of your life,” purpose might be your reason to keep on writing that story—even when things get difficult. It might include the goals that are most important to you, or the things that make life worth living.

#### 3. Questions:

- How would you describe your sense of purpose these days? Where does it seem to be heading, and how would you like it to evolve?
- What have you done—or might you do—to protect your ability to keep pursuing that purpose, even as your abilities change over time?
- If safety and purpose are ever at odds, what tradeoffs might you be willing to make, and what tradeoffs would you not be willing to make?
- What might members of a community like Park Tower do to encourage recognition of and support for each member’s sense of purpose?

As you might imagine, these are many more questions here than we could ever tackle in one Zoom meeting. But if we get together for a presentation on Gawande’s insights, we can dip into the questions and see where we are.

#### Other Resources

There are many videos (available on youtube.com) of Atul Gawande talking about this book. They range in length from 3-5 minutes to 60+ minutes. A list is available here: [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=gawande+being+mortal](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=gawande+being+mortal) (Gawande, A. (2014). *Being mortal: Medicine and what matters in the end*. New York: Metropolitan Books.)

#### Zoom Connection Information

Join us via Zoom on October 21<sup>st</sup>, 7:00 pm for a fascinating presentation and discussion led by Pam Woll on *Aging with Autonomy, Community, and Purpose at Park Tower: based on ideas from Atul Gawande’s “Being Mortal.”*

Topic: Aging with Autonomy Community Purpose at Park Tower Zoom Meeting  
Time: Oct 21, 2020 07:00 PM Central Time (US and Canada)

Join Zoom Meeting with this link

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82371485720?pwd=cmJ5ZE55TE1QUGdEUlEwdklUcHNoZz09>

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