In the documentary, *Young@Heart*, a choir composed of senior citizens, average age of 80, is shown learning several new songs as they prepare for their annual concert. The choir has been together for over 25 years. When it began in 1982, all the participants were residents of a housing project for the elderly in Northampton, MA. Almost from the beginning they collaborated for performances with other groups, from the No Theater to a break dancing group. In 1996 they performed their show “Road to Heaven” in Rotterdam and that was the first of 12 tours to Europe, Australia, and Canada.

When watching the movie it’s easy to fall in love with these seniors who are full of such energy and life. They love the singing. They love the group. They will do almost anything, including checking themselves out of the hospital, to get to rehearsals. These are not easy rehearsals. For the music they’re singing is not music that one usually associates with senior choruses. They’re singing music from the Rolling Stones, Cold Play, The Clash, Outkast—music of their children’s and grandchildren’s generations.

At one point their director, Bob Cilman, was ready to cut “Yes You Can Can” from the program. They were struggling with the rhythms and the repetition of all the “Can Cans” in the song. They refused to give up; instead they told him that they could learn it and it was his job to push them. And so he does. He demands a lot from them, and they give him their all in ways that are inspiring and touching.

As I’ve been thinking of this film in the weeks since I saw it, I find myself contrasting the type of music and the challenges the conductor gave to the group with the way that we usually conduct programs in senior centers, retirement communities, and in assisted living and nursing care. Often, I think, we fall into what I would call “comfort” programming. We do sing-alongs with the old favorites from their generation. We provide arts and crafts that are easy for older hands to do. We do sitting exercise classes that follow the same routine week after week and never really challenge the participants to extend their range of motion or their level of their exertion. We gather weekly for the same current events discussion, reminisce group, and to play the same games.

The elders we serve do need supportive programming and routines that can be counted upon. I think they also need programming that challenges them to go beyond what they know and what they think they can do. I suggest that providing programming that challenges older adults to new learning, and to doing something new and even difficult, is one way of providing spiritual care.
It’s spiritual because without challenges, problems to solve, some sense of newness and growth, life becomes boring. There isn’t much joy in anything. When we meet challenges, try new things, solve a problem our spirits rise and expand. We have a sense of possibility, a sense of our own value, and the hope that there can be another new thing tomorrow. Being challenged to something harder increases our sense of vitality, even in the face of mortality. One of the striking things about the film, Young@Heart, was the energy and vitality of the participants, even as they struggled with health issues and the loss of two of their members.

I challenge you to take a look at your programs through the lens of comfort and challenge. What’s the balance between them? How many programs actually leave your participants energized and smiling? How can you take some of the things you are now doing and move them to be more challenging, interesting, and engaging? What are the resistances you feel within yourself and that you think you will get from participants if you move towards more challenging programming? How do you communicate care as well as challenge?

Ironically, providing challenges for those we serve is a significant way of caring for them, because we know that navigating the challenge and experiencing some pain in the process is the price that we all pay for continued growth and spiritual vitality. That is ultimately what we want for them. While Bob Cilman, the founder and conductor of Young@Heart pushed and challenged his singers, it was obvious that he cared for them deeply. Not only did Bob Cilman care about his singers and their given performances, but his singers accepted his challenges because they knew he would support them.

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