

What struck me most about Virginia's interview wasn't just her innovation in creating Asia's first Distinguished Fellow Program, but her philosophy challenging conventional thinking about aging and retirement.

The Language of Aging

Virginia's declaration—"I'm old. You can't hurt me"—carries profound weight. Stanford's Centre on Longevity research shows positive age stereotypes can add 7.5 years to one's life—more than low blood pressure, healthy weight, regular exercise, or not smoking. The stories we tell ourselves about aging literally affect our longevity.

By claiming "old" as identity rather than insult, Virginia weaponizes it. At 65, she's "free from what other people think your agenda is." Why not embrace this perspective earlier and save ourselves years of anxiety?

The Engineered Blue Zone

Singapore challenges Dan Buettner's Blue Zones research in fascinating ways. Despite importing 95% of its food, Singapore achieves remarkable longevity through "purposeful policies and interventions." This proves longevity isn't just individual lifestyle—it's collective design.

Virginia's breakdown matters: 60% of health comes from social behaviour and environment, 30% from genetics, only 10% from healthcare. Singapore leverages the 70% it can control, aligning with research showing clinical care accounts for just 20% of health outcomes.

The lesson? We obsess over individual optimization—diet, exercise, supplements. But Virginia points to something bigger: social fabric quality, institutional trustworthiness, and daily "friction" levels. The Grab driver trusting payment later exemplifies Singapore's "social capital"—networks, norms, and trust enabling cooperation. High social capital correlates with better health, lower crime, and economic prosperity.

By 2030, nearly one-third of Singaporeans will exceed 65. They're not just living longer—they're living better, with among the world's highest health spans.

Yet Virginia believes longevity without purpose is insufficient. "If we retire at sixty-five but live to a hundred, what happens to the other thirty-five years? Play golf? Drink kopi? That's not thriving."

The Male Energy Transformation

Virginia's most intriguing observation: after two months, male fellows were "walking with higher energy," more animated, even losing weight. Some wives wondered, "Who is this Virginia?"

This connects to research on midlife and retirement depression in men. Psychologist Terrence Real describes "covert depression"—manifesting as irritability or shutdown rather than sadness. The Longevity Project found purpose and engagement predicted longevity more than personality. For men whose identity centers on career, retirement creates existential crisis.

Virginia's program provides "social affirmation" for meaningful work. Fellows aren't randomly learning—they're joining a community valuing contribution and curiosity over status and wealth, unleashing forgotten energy reserves.

Buddhist Philosophy as Hidden Curriculum

Virginia revealed Buddhist principles secretly guiding her program:

Kuo (seeing deeply),
Fang (letting go),
Sai (being free and authentic).

This philosophical framework creates conditions for accessing inner wisdom.

Modern Western identity is often "buffered"—bounded, self-contained, defined by achievement. Virginia's program invites a "porous" identity—open to connection, vulnerability, and transformation. Excluding business and finance courses is brilliant—it's what you don't teach that creates transformation space, forcing comfort with uncertainty.



The Experiments

Virginia's program—humanities, philosophy, religion, arts—cultivates "lateral thinking without technology." You're not becoming an expert but expanding your conceptual toolkit to see hidden connections.

During Covid, leaders with breadth of experience and cross-disciplinary thinking outperformed deep specialists in complex, uncertain environments. Broadened minds and experiences enable drawing from multiple sources when developing solutions.

Experiment 1: Random Learning Sprint

Visit an art gallery, museum, bookstore, or art cinema you wouldn't normally frequent. Explore a random exhibition or watch an unusual film. Alternatively, watch a TED Talk on longevity or healthspan.

Experiment 2: Origin Story Sharing

In leadership retreats I've co-led, we include Origin Story sessions. After a decade of this practice—even with teams working together for years—I'm always amazed how little people truly know about each other.

Narrative psychology shows the stories we tell about our lives shape identity and well-being. Reducing ourselves to career accomplishments loses our full humanity. By sharing childhood experiences and formative moments, Virginia creates "communitas"—equality and togetherness emerging when social structures suspend.

The experiment: At a meal with friends or colleagues, invite everyone to share stories of 'how they became who they are today.' Ask simple questions like "what main events or people shaped you as a child or in your first job?" Then listen. You'll be surprised what you discover.



The Invitation

Virginia isn't saying everyone should return to school. But she shows life's third act—decades between retirement and death—can radically differ from what we've been told.

It needn't be decline, boredom, or waiting. It can be depth, curiosity, contribution, and connection. But it requires intention, releasing conventional success metrics, and embodying what Virginia demonstrates: willingness to be a beginner, be vulnerable, and trust that helping others might best help yourself.

Approach these experiments not as tasks but as invitations to explore. What might open up with more authentic connection space? What becomes possible learning something purely for joy?

Virginia showed me being old isn't being done. It's being free. And freedom is where magic happens.



Thanks for listening. Until next time, don't let the old man in.

DLTOMI is a podcast brought to you by Pod O'Sullivan, where he has real and candid conversations with experts, celebrities and ordinary men about navigating midlife. The ups, the downs, the surprises, the opportunities, the secrets and how to do it on your terms, gracefully or even disgracefully!



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