An old proverb (German, I think) states: "There is no greater obstacle than an open door." A related metaphor is the anxiety and frustration of the artist facing a blank canvas and having to choose among many more ideas than can possibly be expressed in one painting. When the Journal editor, Tom Gullotta, invited some "oldsters" in mental health work to write whatever they wished for the 15th issue, I found the task quite daunting. I wanted something more than a literature review of one of the many specific needs for prevention for the professional readership. Two questions were in my mind: How to explore underlying values and assumptions? And how to communicate with various community people about mental health promotion? I decided to pose a challenge—to say in short letters to different people some of the ideas that broadly underlie prevention and promotion. Perhaps such a letter-writing process would help to clarify what is essential and appropriate. It would be interesting to see how others would handle this assignment. The first of the three letters is probably the greatest challenge.

1Address correspondence and reprint requests to Norman D. Sundberg, Department of Psychology, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.
LETTER TO A TEN-YEAR OLD GRANDDAUGHTER

Dear Amy,

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about what to learn and do to have a good life. (We psychologists often call this mental health or behavioral effectiveness.) Some children, right now at your age, are learning very useful things for the rest of their lives, and others are not. What is good to be learning about life?

One thing is sure; we live with all sorts of other people. In your town, or community, there is a lot to notice and appreciate about people. As you can see, some are short and some are tall, some are boys and some are girls. People differ in age, the way they talk, and the colors of their skin. Some are nice to you; others are not, and it's hard to understand why sometimes. Everyone is learning how to get along with other people, but they learn different things in different ways. And they live in different homes and go to different schools and workplaces.

Here are three questions for you: (1) In what ways are you like everyone else on earth? (I bet you think of several; one is that we all have eyes and mouths; you can think of others too, such as we all had mothers and fathers.) (2) In what ways are you like some other people you know but not like others? (For instance, you are a girl and 10 years old. What are others?) (3) In what ways are you unlike anyone else on earth? (You'll think of many ways, but two are that your fingerprints are not exactly like anyone else's and what you have done in your life — your life history — is different from that of everyone else.) As you think of other people and yourself as you grow up, it is useful to think of all whom you meet as having some things like everyone, some things like just some others, and some things which are completely special or unique. You will like some things about people, and you won't like others, but always these differences and similarities are interesting.

Another important thing as one grows up is how to deal with scary events. Remember when we went to the petting zoo, and you were holding some food we bought for the animals. The deer and goats crowded around so close that it was kind of frightening. You ran away, throwing the food down on the ground, and the animals left and grabbed it. That's one way of dealing with a scary situation — somehow get away from it. Later on you petted the deer and llamas without the food, and they were quiet and happy and so were you. You tried feeding the deer and goats again; this time you held the food out, part in each hand, and though they came close, it wasn't so frightening. What can be learned from situations like that? One thing is that we do learn by trying again. Another is that excited animals (and people) can act differently from how they act when they are