

THE CHANGING FACE OF AGE

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ABSTRACT

This article chronicles the author's coming to terms with aging and her search for inspirational literature to help define a time of life whose powers are too often devalued or outright hidden. In such luminaries as Betty Friedan, James Hillman, and Robert Johnson, among others, she found the unheralded pioneers who are redefining age as a powerful stage of life during which we complete the task of birthing ourselves.

BOOK DIGEST

(In the order presented)

- The Fountain of Age** by Betty Friedan. Simon & Schuster, 1993.
- What Are Old People For?** by William H. Thomas. Vander Wyk & Burnham, 2004.
- The Healthy Aging Brain: Sustaining Attachment, Attaining Wisdom** by Louis Cozolino. Norton, 2008.
- Aging With Grace** by David Snowdon. Bantam, 2001.
- The Force of Character and the Lasting Life** by James Hillman. Ballantine 1999.
- Living Your Unlived Life: Coping With Unrealized Dreams and Fulfilling Your Purpose in the Second Half of Life** by Robert Johnson. Tarcher/Putnam, 2007.
- The Next Fifty Years: A Guide for Women at Midlife and Beyond** by Pamela Blair. Hampton Roads, 2005
- Seven Strategies for Positive Aging** by Robert Hill. Norton, 2008.

At 57, Judith was a housewife out of a job. Her children were grown, her youngest one just off to college. In her empty nest, Judith found herself with a lot of time and energy on her hands and no purpose. All of a sudden, no one needed her and uneasy feelings began to surface, soon followed by anxiety-provoking questions: "Who Am I?" "What is my purpose in life?" "Who am I if nobody needs me anymore?"

In the old days, when she was busy cooking, helping with homework, driving the children to school, and supervising all their activities, the answer to these questions had been easy: "I am a mother and my children need me." Although a talented artist, she had set her own career path aside. She had lived her life to be of service, responded to circumstances with whatever was needed of her: "I did what I had to do to make the best out of any situation." But now, the identity question begged new answers and she had none. She was in a transitional phase where she needed to redefine herself: "Now that there are no demands and I can decide my own fate, what do I want?" Judith was faced with the task of developing a new identity: "I've never lived for myself, I don't know what I want." She had been a great mother, and now she did not know how to regroup. "Is it too late?" she wondered. No longer tied down by obligations and commitments, she was searching for new possibility.

Increasingly, I am called to explore issues of aging with my clients. The vignette above is but one of the many scenarios I have encountered in my practice. Aging is particularly poignant to me as I face my own and witness my mother slowly lose her mind to senile dementia. Many of my clients, who are facing issues of aging themselves, also struggle to manage their ill parents' end-of-life passage.

THE FOUNTAIN OF AGE

Wrinkles are the sum of all the days we have lived and will never live again.

—William H. Thomas, M.D.

Rosemary is an actress in her early 50s. As a new client, she quickly made herself at home in my office. “I have many issues,” she said, “but before I deal with any of them, I have to do something about this upper lip. Do you know a good plastic surgeon?” In my practice this is not an isolated incident. When it comes to aging and body image, I was alerted to the severity of potential problems by a client who shamefully admitted that she had secretly spent her daughter’s college fund on plastic surgery. Another client reported being concerned for her 14-year old daughter whose friends are injecting themselves with bootleg Botox from Mexico as a wrinkle preventative. These examples are indicative of a culture which largely views aging as a disease and desperately struggles to hold on to the illusion of youth.

The face of age is changing. The new cosmetic technologies are shifting the way our culture relates to aging and increasingly, a face that reveals its owner's age is considered out of style. Across the board, the numbers show the trend: about \$12 billion spent on cosmetic medical treatments in 2008, and another \$49 billion on cosmetics and toiletries. Since 2000, the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reports a 48% increase in elective cosmetic procedures. As the latest Chanel age-minimizing fluid makeup advertisement counsels: “Firmly resist the look of aging.” The media's image of "growing younger," of becoming "ageless," implies that graceful aging means hanging on to our youthful physical appearance.

Every eight seconds someone turns 50. For the first time in history, we who are 50+ face the prospect of longevity as a *group*. We are on the leading edge of history. It is up to us to redefine aging and use the scientific advances to explore hopeful, empowering new ways of thinking about ourselves and our bodies.

When it became clear that I could no longer deny that age, like an unwelcome visitor, was knocking at my door, I was grateful to find Betty Friedan’s last major work, *The Fountain of Age*. In the late 1950s, Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique* launched the women's liberation movement and changed my life. In a repeat performance, *The Fountain of Age* challenges both men and women to look at what is obsolete in the way we think about age.

Good questions help refocus our thinking and set us on a path of higher understanding. The authors that held my attention for this review were all guided by key questions about the evolution of our inner life as we age. For Betty Friedan, three powerful consciousness-raising questions act as the cornerstones of her inquiry:

- When women grow beyond the limits of their biological role and find new purposes for their lives, could that larger human dimension change the very biology of the aging process? (p. 15)
- Can women's aging process actually be affected by a change in their definition of themselves? (p. 16)
- Might a new dimension of our humanity emerge with age? (p.19)

She takes a courageous look at the clichés about senility, at our hopes, our fears, our prejudices, and more importantly at the new trends that are emerging. Once again, as she did in the 1950s, Friedan's methodical research and forthright insights work their consciousness-raising magic.

Redefining Ourselves

Old beliefs must crumble before the new can emerge...and the new must emerge for the old to crumble. The changing face of age leads us away from a declinist view of "old" into an optimistic new and unknown territory. This unknown territory has as yet no rituals, only a sense of hope arising from our increased longevity.

As I read Friedan, I finally "got" it: *It is not aging that is the disease; the disease is the attachment to youth.* The denial of age places the mind in conflict with the biological reality of the body. When we deny our age, we create a conflicting split between the mind and the body. The mind feels betrayed by the aging body and the aging body is distressed because it can never satisfy the mind's desire for immortality. At its best, this split results in an uncomfortable anxiety that arises whenever aging is mentioned. *"Aging? No, not me. Look at me...I look much younger than my age!"* At its worst, when under the scrutiny of a youth-and-beauty-obsessed critical mind, the body becomes victim to all manners of critical judgements and questionable cosmetic procedures.

Growing Older

Friedan devoted the end years of her life to researching age. She charts her own voyage of discovery into a different kind of aging full of new possibilities for intimacy and purpose. Ageism, she notes, whether silently or overtly, is a prejudice that runs through our lives in innumerable ways. Unlike racism or sexism, which is generally directed at others, we who are aging hold the ageism prejudice against ourselves, and few prejudices are as powerful as that concerning aging.

Today's longer life expectancy, which should be cause for joy, is often an occasion to roll out horrifying statistics about how the Social Security system will collapse under the influx of millions of dependent and useless citizens. These useless citizens are apparently all of us born post World War II — we the baby boomers. Intent on countering the negative cultural matrix, Friedan quotes optimistic statistics:

- Only 5% of people over 65 are in nursing homes, and less than 10% will ever live in such facilities.
- Only 5% of people over 65 suffer from Alzheimer's; it is a disease, and not the normal aging we can anticipate.

Contrary to what the media and medical profession present, the statistics do not reflect a picture that equates old age with nursing homes, wheelchairs, incontinence, senile dementia, erectile dysfunction and memory loss. If only 5% of aging individuals are in nursing homes or can expect to develop Alzheimer's, what is happening to the other 95%?

Friedan's point is that we continue to develop psychologically and spiritually throughout our lifespan. We progress on our psychological journey in spite of the fact that many will encounter serious medical or financial problems in the later stages of life. Increasing numbers of aging adults express a vitality that models a different way of *growing* older. And the word *growing* is the operative here.

Friedan leads the way in recalibrating our collective image of old age. After all, since we will be spending a lot more time living as "old" people, it is time to create a new self-image that frees us from the shackles of a definition that has become too narrow for our potential. This frames the popular statement *60 is the new 40* as movement in the hopeful direction of renewed vitality. Increasingly, people 50 and over report that they find themselves in the prime years of their lives, so much so that the term *golden years* has been replaced by *prime time*. For many, age brings an affirmation of self, often an acceptance of aspects of self that were uncomfortable in earlier years. As one of Friedan's interviewees insightfully describes:

"I'm more and more myself. I'm more comfortable with differences, not uptight about them. I suppose along the way I got a larger vision somehow. I've more desire to browse in the library stacks and learn now than ever in my life. I'm not envious of anybody else and I'm not anguished about my own failures. I also know if I were there again, I'd fail again, so what..." (p. 572)

If you love life, there is plenty of good news. In 1900, a woman's life expectancy was 46. Today, it has almost doubled. As a result of scientific advances, better medicine, and healthier lifestyles, people in their 70s and 80s represent the fastest growing segment of the population. By today's standards, we can reasonably expect to reach 90. Some experts are saying that a lifespan of 150 is on the way. The current extended life expectancy means that we can have some 40 years of quality time after we turn 50.

This unprecedented extension of life has the potential to unleash unimagined human resources if we can find the way to capitalize on life's wisdom and make our additional years productive. We are, writes Friedan, *the unheralded pioneers of age*. It is through the individual experiences of people and groups finding new meaning for their longevity that we are beginning to get a glimpse of what is possible for all of us.

THE HIDDEN POWERS OF AGE

We should not measure old age by the same yardstick with which we measure youth. Old age is as different from adulthood as adulthood is different from childhood. At 40 or 50, we fear aging, and too often, when we measure age by the yardstick of youth, we further the declinist point of view of age as disease, disability, dependence, and death. Thinking of age in youth's terms, we can become trapped in a desperate game we can only lose.

William H. Thomas's book title reflects his driving question: *What Are Old People For?* He quotes research showing that advancing age is associated with an increase in positive affect. Older people are better than younger people at regulating their emotional states. Older adults demonstrate a greater understanding of emotional states, are less labile, have greater impulse control and more emotional coping strategies. According to those who successfully embrace their age, accepting the losses due to aging opens the way to greater personal and emotional freedom. Perhaps, and the research does not differentiate, it is those who better regulate their affect who make it to old age. But whichever it is, those who gracefully mediate age have a greater complexity of emotional experience and become better at experiencing and balancing both positive and negative emotions at the same time. The emotional

dimension of old age is as yet little understood, but it is clear that at a time in life when cognitive speed and biological hardiness are challenged, emotional functioning continues to improve.

Thomas quotes Lars Tornstam of the Social Gerontology Group at Uppsala University and the creator of the theory of gerotranscendence. Gerotranscendence, which is the outcome of decades of careful interviews with men and women ages 52 to 97, outlines a pattern of development that unfolds in the later decades of life. Tornstam organizes the results of his interviews into three categories: changes in the self, in relationship, and in what he calls cosmic insight (p. 28-29):

Self

- A continuing process of discovery that reveals previously hidden aspects of the self, good and bad.
- A decrease in self-centeredness and a move toward altruism.
- A rediscovery of childhood and appreciation of its pleasures.

Relationships

- Increased selectivity and less interest in superficial relationships.
- Increased need for solitude.
- Clearer distinction between self and the roles we play.
- Less acquisitiveness, greater awareness of how possessions can ensnare and confine.
- Pleasure in transcending social norms.
- Greater appreciation of the grey areas between right and wrong, accompanied by greater tolerance.

Cosmic Insight

- Receding fear of death, giving way to a curiosity about what comes next.
- A renewed interest in genealogy and past generations.
- A renewed interest in nature and our connections with the vast living world.
- A blurring of time and space boundaries.

Tornstam's model suggests that human longevity opens the potential for a transcendent movement away from the materialistic and rational points of view of the first half of life. The successful completion of this transcendent shift is accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction. Older people as a whole are less depressed than younger adults. Tornstam's research shows that the human mind continues to evolve into the last decades of life; the ongoing deepening and reinterpretation of self, society, and cosmic reality are the result of a maturing brain.

TENDING TO OUR BRAIN

How old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?

—Satchel Paige

Louis Cozolino's new book, *The Healthy Aging Brain* speaks to this evolution of the mind by addressing one of the crucial aspects of our longevity: tending to our brain. His book shines like a ray of sunlight on an overcast day. In his previous book, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Building and Rebuilding the Human Brain*, Cozolino describes how recent discoveries in the neurosciences show that the brain is an organ of adaptation able to remain flexible throughout the lifespan. The untested and outdated idea that

the brain is a relatively static entity determined by the interaction between genetic preprogramming and early childhood can, once and for all, be filed away in our archives.

Neural plasticity throughout the lifespan is now a given. The brain remains adaptable, flexible, and most importantly, it benefits from enriched environments throughout life — what is called use-dependent development. “Use it or lose it” is the rule. Learning and adapting to new circumstances trigger the growth of new neurons and enhance the branching of dendritic connections between existing neurons, whatever our age. Therefore, the direction is clear: To age with grace, to support the neurogenesis that brings about the integration of new states of being, to make life as long and as fulfilling as possible, we must keep stimulating our brains and challenge ourselves to keep learning.

For Cozolino, tending to healthy brain function is the foundation for a positive reframe of aging. His driving questions about aging revolve around the care of the brain:

- *If our brains continue to grow until we’re 40, 60, 80, or 122, what are the implications?*
- *Is there a way for our brain to age optimally?*
- *What if the healthy aging brain progresses through a number of adaptive incarnations tied to our social roles and responsibilities? (p. 6)*

Cozolino finds the answers to his questions in the science of interpersonal neurobiology. Our neurobiological health and longevity are inextricably linked to those around us, grounded in human relationship, in kin and in tribe, in parenting, grandparenting, marriage, and in all other intimate relationships. He repeatedly makes the point that healthy and vital longevity is a function of the care we receive and give, the support and interdependence we experience, and the meaningful place we enjoy in our community.

Lessons in Longevity: The Nun Study

Perhaps the most powerful example supporting Cozolino’s conclusion on the importance of community and relationship can be found in David Snowdon’s groundbreaking “Nun Study.” Snowdon’s long-term research involves 678 Sisters of Notre Dame, a Catholic congregation of teaching sisters. Remarkably, the sisters live much longer than the general statistical norm, most sisters living happily well into their 90s and 100s. They opened their lives and personal history to help Snowdon understand the nature of Alzheimer’s disease.

What makes this study unique is the fact that the convent keeps a detailed record of every aspect of the sisters’ lives from the time they enter the convent in their teens till their death. The average age of the study participants was 89. Over the years, Snowdon regularly administered mental examination tests and at their death, the sisters donated their brains for autopsy. In all, the sisters have so far donated more than 300 brains, all carefully preserved for ongoing and future research; 295 of the original participants are still alive. *Aging with Grace* reveals the sisters’ “secret” to longevity, and the lessons learned about their longevity paints a revolutionary picture of what it takes to maintain a long and productive life.

Snowdon discovered that it is the interdependence and mutually supportive community that the sisters have created for themselves that maintains their health and longevity. Every sister is assured a meaningful place in her community, and the community is responsive to her as her needs change. No sister ever need fear aloneness or lack of care. The congregation is dedicated to creating a safe and

caring environment in which every individual is valued for her talents, can participate to the degree of her capacity, and can trust that her needs, whatever they may be, will be heard and taken seriously.

I recommend reading *Aging with Grace* if you want to immerse yourself in a world where community is so strong that it offers its members an unfaltering, unconditional, and lifelong assurance of safety, allowing life to unfold meaningfully in trust and joy. This is more than most of us who struggle to make ends meet dare hope for! Snowdon's findings substantiate the link between our longevity and our need for an integrated social self.

Storytelling and Life Review Therapy

Historically, in human tribes, elders were the storytellers, the guardians of long-term memory. It is the elders who were sought out for practical and spiritual guidance, who were the peacemakers in times of conflict, elders who were in charge of the rituals that served as points of transitions. It is the elders who nurtured the curiosity of the young, who supported their creation of a self-narrative. To fulfill these social roles within the tribe, the brain undergoes changes in how it processes information.

The old of today, says Cozolino, still want and need to tell their stories. Sadly, it is the young who seem to have lost the desire to listen. Maintaining identity, stability, and integrity during the later stages of life is a challenge in a culture that no longer supports the storytelling function of the elder. To assist older adults in telling their stories, forms of treatment such as life review therapy have emerged. In addition to being the repository of the culture's past, aging people need support to develop a personal narrative that will help them navigate their own old age. We know that helping a child create a coherent life narrative is an important parental function that helps the child develop optimal brain function, resilience, and the capacity for secure attachment. The elder's function as storyteller is the flowering of the child's need for a coherent life narrative, and this need continues to evolve on personal and social levels throughout our years.

As therapists, it is important to support and enhance the naturally occurring process of reminiscence that is common in older adults. Life, after all, consists of a series of stories we tell about ourselves, and as we age, these stories take on certain themes. Originally based on the ideas of Robert Butler, a life review covers such themes as transitions and changing roles within the family, experiences related to work, historical events, changes in health, life values, turning points, and existential issues. Accordingly, participants conducting a life review are invited to bring scrapbooks, photographs, memorabilia, anything to facilitate remembering. The techniques of life review therapy can be used within the context of psychotherapy or as a self-contained form of treatment. To orient the reader to this specialized therapy, Cozolino lists some examples of typical questions that prompt a life review. The goal is to encourage a process of reorganization and integration:

- *"You've told me about what happened but can you tell me how you felt about it?"*
- *"How do you feel about it now?"*
- *"Did the events cause new personal insights?"*
- *"How have these experiences contributed to the person you are today?"* (p. 272)

In such a process the therapist becomes the container and matrix within which an older adult can reconstruct and update his or her life narrative. The therapist supports older adults in the structuring of their thinking about their life experience and the reshaping of their ideas about their identity:

- *"What were your goals as a child, as a young adult, now?"*

- “What do you hope to achieve in the future?”
- “What do you think your legacy will be?” (p. 272)

Through the process of exploration, deconstruction, and reintegration of memory, the therapist helps synthesize the past into here-and-now awareness. The therapist’s questions hopefully result in updating and bringing the complex elements of a long life into a meaningful and coherent story.

The Emergence of Wisdom

One of my favorite chapters in Cozolino’s *The Healthy Aging Brain* describes the quantum shift by which knowledge becomes wisdom. This chapter defines the difference between an older adult and a wise elder. The emergence of personal wisdom requires a great deal of interpersonal support, and there is a broad range of characteristics that define less to more mature self integration. Along with maturing cognitive integration, the maturation of emotion presents a profound challenge: taming the amygdala, accentuating the positive to create cycles of optimism, and transforming suffering into compassion and acceptance. To support the maturation of a complex nervous system such as we humans possess, aging brings a significant increase in the power of adaptation. Old age may be seen as a time of loss, but it is far more than that. With age we trade speed for flexibility, choose responsibility over projection, and overcome our narcissism to make peace with our mortality. We are challenged to meet ongoing lifelong integration of worldly experience with emotional maturity, self-awareness, and compassion.

Gifted with a comprehensive grasp of neuroscience and psychology, Cozolino has written an optimistic and healing book about the brain as a social organ whose full maturation depends on the connections we make between attachment, wisdom, emotion, and storytelling.

IF ALL AGING ENDS IN DYING, WHAT IS THE POINT?

The death of an old person is like the loss of a library.

—African proverb

Jungian analyst James Hillman adds his own set of poignant questions to the quest to bring meaning to aging:

- *Why do we live so long?*
- *Beyond our years of fertility, often outlasting our muscular usefulness and sensory acuteness, what does aging serve?*
- *If all aging ends in dying, what is the point? (p. xiii-xiv)*

In *Force of Character*, Hillman reflects on the fact that our last years of life confirm and fulfill our character. Hillman sees old age as a time when one’s primary ground of being moves to the soul. Our task, he writes, is to discover the soul of aging. His thoughts align with Tornstam’s gerotranscendence theory:

The old are like images on display that transpose biological life into imagination, into art. The old become strikingly memorable, ancestral representations, characters in the play of civilization, each unique, irreplaceable figure of value. Aging an art form? (p. xv)

Decouple death from aging, counsels Hillman. Aging, he tells us, does not equate with becoming dead. The challenge is to find value in aging, to connect old age with the overarching archetypal force present in all beings and life forms. Vital old age is a time when character reaches its term revealing more character, not more death.

Old age brings about the realization of our character and with this realization a calling emerges: the call to step out and become *an elder*. Hillman uses the word *elder* with reverence. We miss the calling of elder when we retreat within the secular walls of the old-age home and lose the archetypal footing of life's transcendent vision. As a wise elder himself, Hillman calls for a dedication, a mythic restoration of the temple to the old. The temple's foundation, he suggests, is in the elders' power of thought, and the temple walls are constructed out of the elders' wise writing about aging and the meaning of life.

Wisdom, compassion, and understanding are some of the qualities assigned to elders. If the increasing numbers of today's aging individuals were to respond to the calling to become elders, they could change the balance of society. Theodore Rosak in his book, *America the Wise* (1998, Houghton Mifflin), envisions a time when the growing numbers of wise elders could bring about a movement away from predatory capitalism and environmental exploitation toward values held dear by seniors: alleviation of suffering, nonviolence, justice, nurturing, and maintaining the health and beauty of the planet. I can't help but notice that these are also the goals of youth, at least the youth of my 1960s generation. Perhaps, the natural affinity between grandparents⁹ and their grandchildren will extend to create a social alliance, a future where the passion of youth and the wisdom of old age find a synergistic alignment within a common purpose.

Solutions to creating a synergistic society where young and old benefit from each others' gifts have been proposed: for example combining nursing homes with nurseries, day care and preschools would naturally harness the nurturing grandparenting qualities of the elders and infuse them with the joy and excitement of tending to new life, or having younger and older adults share a job so that knowledgeable older workers can mentor the younger and the younger can keep their seniors abreast of new developments.

Is it Hillman's and Rosak's utopian fantasy to propose that as elders claim their power, their values will become more central to our society? If, as research shows, positive aging brings renewed curiosity and desire to learn, along with the courage to risk transgression, we can imagine old age as a time to step forth and lead with important new ideas. The final maturation of character that comes with age awakens the hope that elders will come forth who are wise to the veil of illusion and who can aptly reveal the naked reality hiding behind the robes of falsehood.

Coming to Terms with Failure

We all have a lived and an unlived life, write Jungian analyst Robert Johnson and his collaborator and fellow Jungian Jerry M. Ruhl. In *Living Your Unlived Life: Coping with Unrealized Dreams in the Second Half of Life*, they add their own pertinent questions to elucidate the experience of aging:

- *As you grow in years, are you growing who you really are?*
- *Are you leading the life you were meant to lead?*
- *Is it too late to change course?*

The answer is simple: It is never too late even if outer circumstances cannot be altered. As the years go by, we are taken by the demands of life and an inventory of abandoned, unrealized, or undeveloped talents and potentials accumulates. This unlived life lingers in the form of longings, disappointments, bitterness, cynicism, apathy, and midlife depression. Johnson defines the unlived life as whatever seems to be missing. The unlived life seeking our attention can be found in the spouse we hate, in the job that bores us, in yearnings, and in unrealized dreams.

In *Living Your Unlived Life*, Johnson and Ruhl have written an elegant and simple book that presents a realistic approach to transforming regret into greater consciousness. “*If only I had...*” — the lamentations of regret, of missed opportunities, of lost experiences should convince us that it is important to make a survey of our unlived life while there is still time. As we age, we come face to face with our failures and losses. We are confronted by our limitations and realize that our capacity to control outcomes is not always within our power. Our presumptions of omnipotence are deflated. If we are to enjoy the later decades of our lives, we must learn to make meaning out of the failures of the first half of life.

As did Cozolino, Johnson and Ruhl find that telling our life story is an essential way to capture our psychological condition with accuracy. With age, the themes that emerge in our personal stories transcend our single individual experience and connect us with the universal themes of the collective imagination. When we tell our life story with authenticity, we discover how we have participated in age-old mythic patterns; we see how we have reenacted the mythic in our home, at our workplace, and on the street corner. Through telling our life story, we come to see how the moments of our life that may have felt fragmented, accidental, or tragic belong to a greater whole. Connecting to a mythic pattern is a kind of consecration that deepens our self-acceptance and self-understanding. It gives our life legitimacy and the sanction of greater meaning.

Exploring the Paths Not Taken

In the second half of life, we are called upon to examine the truths by which we live. We mellow into the realization that truth is relative — what we held as universal truths expands to encompass the acknowledgment that their opposites also contain truth.

In the second half of life, we are called to achieve greater wholeness. Johnson and Ruhl believe that living our unlived life is the most important task of our mature years; it is the way to fulfillment, it brings a sense of purpose and meaning to our existence. When brought into awareness, our unlived dreams can propel us beyond our disappointments and our failures. An *Unlived Life Inventory* is included to help us identify where we are in life and what potentials remain relatively unlived. The book’s intent is to heal the split between the life we have and the one we yearn for, and to that end, it encourages us to dialogue with our separated energies.

Death

Much of the literature about aging shrinks from talking about the ultimate moment. Johnson and Ruhl encourage us to look at death fearlessly: “*A dying person who cannot let go of life is as neurotic and stuck as a young person who is unable to embrace it*” (p. 212). Shrinking from death, they believe, robs the second half of life of its purpose. To help us come to term with what makes most of us shiver with repulsion, they remind us that nothing exists in our human dimension without its opposite being close by: “*Death is closely associated with ecstatic experience*” (p. 213). Given that ecstasy means “to stand

outside oneself,” as we age, we naturally prepare for the ultimate ecstatic experience by increasingly feeling our oneness with all. As we approach death with awareness, our sense of connection with all people and all things deepens:

We begin to grasp a new vision, to see the dance of God in everything. This dance is uniquely expressed in you, in me, in every detail of the incarnate world. This is to become sanctified and unified.(p. 214)

POSITIVE STRATEGIES FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS

Growing old is a complex, detailed experience. We each approach it in our own way, at first sensing the losses that come with the wear of time and the pains of life: physical losses, career losses, rejections that result from our culture’s tendency to discard the aged, and social losses as we lose dear ones and friends to death.

I see my clients encounter the experience of age over and over as they move forward on life’s time-line. Bonnie’s first distressing encounter with age came at 39 with the reality that she could no longer get pregnant and had missed her chance to be a mother; for Joe, it came at 48 with a back injury that would no longer allow him to practice the sports he loved; for Marcia at 82, it comes daily as her friends become ill and die, and she realizes that she will not see her great granddaughters grow up.

As a therapist, I am always on the lookout for easily accessible and practical resource material for my clients. I found two workbooks, written in the spirit of celebration and using the current theories on aging to create a mindful practice that influences life satisfaction.

The Next Fifty Years, which is intended to be both a workbook and personal journal, contains more than 150 short essays covering a broad range of topics that relate specifically to women and aging. Author Pamela Blair affirms that there has never been a better time to be a woman over 50. *The Next Fifty Years* recognizes that today’s aging woman is more complex and multidimensional than the women of previous generations and offers a meaningful forum for thoughts, concerns, joys, frustrations, and sharing on a wide range of topics: self-image, health, finances, creativity, spirituality, relationships, fears, mind, and emotions. Moving from the serious to the lighthearted, this book is a creative and practical guide intended to help women reevaluate the wide spectrum of outdated beliefs regarding the aging process. Blair encourages her readers to make peace with themselves, embrace unexplored aspects of self, and dive passionately into what they love — all goals identified as the primary tasks of age.

For group leaders, *The Next Fifty Years* provides guidelines for an 18-session support or study group; each session is organized around a goal, offers direction for group facilitation, and provides core discussion questions. This guide to “the best years of your life” hopes to provide the template for a written legacy between generations of women — past, present and to come.

Robert Hill coined the term *positive agers*. Positive agers, he writes, possess four characteristics that allow them to cope with their vulnerabilities as they grow old; the ability to (1) mobilize resources to meet the challenges of aging, (2) make life choices that preserve well-being, (3) cultivate flexibility to deal with age-related decline, and (4) focus on the positive. Deriving meaning from engaging in self-improvement

and promoting growth in others are the cornerstones of positive aging and maturity in old age. In his book *Seven Strategies for Positive Aging*, Hill, who is aligned with the Positive Psychology movement, offers the following seven strategies:

- You can find meaning in old age.
- You're never too old to learn.
- You can use the past to cultivate wisdom.
- You can strengthen lifespan relationships.
- You can promote growth through giving and receiving help.
- You can forgive yourself and others.
- You can possess a grateful attitude. (p.146)

Hill offers solutions. Each chapter of the book corresponds to one of these seven strategies and provides guidelines and exercises for incorporating these strategies into one's daily lifestyle. Filled with effective skill-building techniques based on the most recent research into the psychology of aging, Hill gives us the tools to develop the qualities of being that will help us become positive agers, or as Hillman would say, join the ranks of the elders.

Hill thinks of the seven strategies as notes on a piano: each has a tonal value, each is beautiful in its own right. When notes are played in groups, they expand in the resonance of chords. If, furthermore, chords are played in the context of a larger score, the full beauty and potential of each individual note unfolds to become profoundly meaningful within a greater whole. So, Hill suggests, the seven strategies for positive aging complement and enhance one another. Positive agers are individuals who use the seven strategies in concert. Over the years, they have practiced their scales, developed their playing skills. They know how to learn, how to find meaning, how to change their behavior for the better, how to strengthen their relationships, how to help others, forgive, and feel grateful. They can mobilize resources, act flexibly, make affirmative life decisions, and emphasize the positive.

If life is an art form, as Hillman suggests, then positive agers have become consummate artists, reaping the rewards of their finely honed life skills, enjoying the flowering of their character. And for those who have not developed or fine-tuned their positive aging skills, Hill's book is a good resource guide to practice mindful aging.

IN CONCLUSION

The best age is the age you are.

—Maggie Kuhn, Founder, Grey Panthers

Old age brings the maturation that completes the arc of life. The authors who nurture my soul and my aging body do not tantalize with promises of eternal youth, they do not add their voice to the popular prescriptions for physical agelessness. They choose a different path. They confirm that aging is inevitable and offer strategies for a maturation that optimizes our psychological and spiritual growth.

From the minute we are born, we age. None of us is spared. Deceptions, evasions, and candy-coating create seductive illusions that soothe us into the temporary bliss of denial. When it comes to the biological fact of aging, each one of us needs support and the courage and strength to face the truth. We cannot turn back the hands of time, but we can be grateful for the wisdom that allows us to embrace and celebrate the age we are.

Students of the inner world learn that the secret to a long and fulfilling life can be found in the renewed energies that emanate from acceptance, appreciation, and gratefulness, from joy and learning, and most of all, from an expanded sense of self, community, and spirituality.
