

CHAPTER 11

Late Adulthood

APPROACHING THE HORIZON



To be seventy is like climbing the Alps. You reach a snow-covered summit and see beyond you the deep valley stretching miles and miles away, and before you other summits higher and whiter which you may have the strength to climb or you may not. Then you sit down and meditate and wonder which it will be.

—HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW¹

In ancient Hindu society when a man reached an age when his hair began to turn white, his skin started to wrinkle, and his sons and daughters gave birth to their own children, this was a signal to begin a new stage of life. He was instructed by the laws of Manu to leave his household responsibilities and enter the forest, where he was to build a fire and perform rituals to the gods as part of a growing preoccupation with a spiritual life. After a time, even this stage was to be abandoned, and the old man was instructed to renounce all worldly goods and activities and travel naked or dressed only in a robe as a beggar in search of liberation.

Such a sanctified prescription for living was impractical for most Hindus. They sought instead a modified approach to these ancient laws. Many Hindus of both sexes discovered that a more realistic way to follow the spirit of these laws was to begin gradually withdrawing from an active worldly life and start devoting more time to contemplation, meditation,

and the study of sacred texts as they got older. Today, this tradition still lives on in many parts of India. One study of aging in a northern Indian Bengali village, for example, reported that old age there is characterized by a preoccupation with ways to cut the strings of *Maya*, those attachments to people, places, and things that bind us to this illusory world and to the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. Elder Bengali villagers take up celibacy, give away belongings, and make pilgrimages to holy sites in an attempt to loosen the bindings of *Maya* and prepare for death.²

This sacred approach to late adulthood is very different from the aging scenario generally supported by contemporary Western culture. Rather than entering into a stage of life that acknowledges one's own insignificance in the cosmos, many aging people in the West look for ways to extend their worldly lives into an indefinite future. Instead of beginning a process of disengagement with the world, Westerners tend to want to put off being old for as long as possible.

The idea that we can live healthy lives far past the biblical three score and ten years has been at least partially supported by medical science, which has made it possible for more and more people to live healthy lives into their eighties, nineties, and beyond. In fact, the pool of those who live past 100—the centenarians of society—has been increasing by leaps and bounds. Currently, there are about seventy thousand centenarians in the United States. The U.S. Census Department predicts that this number will increase almost thirty-fold to 834,000 by the year 2050.³ And among the dozen or so projects that are currently studying people over 100, several suggest that if you can make it past the diseases of middle age, then the eighties and beyond can be a time of relatively robust health. Medical expenses, which peak for those sixty to sixty-nine, in fact, actually drop for those 85 to 105.⁴ “The centenarians I have met have, with few exceptions, reported that their 90s were essentially problem-free,” said Thomas Perls, a Harvard geriatrician who heads the New England Centenarian Study. “Many were employed, sexually active, and enjoyed the outdoors and the arts. They basically carried on as if age were not an issue.”⁵ Demographers are now starting to count the numbers of “supercentenarians”—people over the age of 110.

DO WE REALLY HAVE TO DIE?

This expansion of the life cycle has led some to wonder whether we need to die at all. The quest for eternal life in the body is certainly not a new project. For thousands of years, Chinese Taoists have searched for the secrets of immortality in the control of breathing and diet, and the use of reputedly magical substances such as cinnabar and ginseng.⁶ The ancient Greek poet Hesiod spoke of a golden age in humanity's past when mortals never aged. We've also grown up with legends of Shangri-la and the Fountain of Youth filling our imaginations with the possibility of living forever. This has led a few respectable scientists and thinkers, as well as a horde of savvy entrepreneurs, to suggest that the right combination of exercise, diet, meditation, rejuvenation formulas, and genetic engineering may be able to indefinitely prolong life. Biogerontologist Aubrey de Grey, for example, believes it is possible for humans to live thousands of years, and has initiated a project called "Engineered Negligible Senescence" to find ways to permanently reverse the aging process.⁷ Inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil suggests that if you can just stay alive for another fifty years, technology will have advanced to the point where you can live forever.⁸

Such claims, however, have met with sharp criticism from the mainstream scientific community. In one strongly worded manifesto published in the *Scientific American*, three scientists wrote: "No currently marketed intervention—none—has yet proved to slow, stop or reverse human aging, and some can be downright dangerous . . . anyone purporting to offer an anti-aging product today is either mistaken or lying."⁹ Most scientists now believe that there are biological constraints that limit the human life span to a maximum of around 120 years. There are a number of theories for why we age and eventually have to die. One theory proposes that human DNA and other components of life in human cells are exposed to an accumulation of random damage that eventually exceeds the body's own self-repair capabilities. Highly reactive molecules called free radicals, which contain unpaired electrons frantically seeking their mates, damage human cells and are often pointed to as a particular

culprit in this wear-and-tear theory. It may be that individuals who live to ripe old ages have genes that limit the activity of these free radicals. Another theory suggests that human cells can only divide a finite number of times. Genetic research indicates that each time a cell divides, the end section of each chromosome—called the telomere—becomes a little shorter. Like the burning of a candle, when the telomere eventually runs out of wick, so to speak, the cell no longer can divide and it dies. While the human body produces a chemical called telomerase that can lengthen the telomere (it keeps the length of chromosomes constant in egg and sperm cells throughout life), it is also responsible for the growth of cells in cancer. Though it has been used to extend the life span of fruit flies, its use as a way to prolong the human life span is still problematic.

FACING OUR FRAGILITY IN LATE ADULTHOOD

Even if we *were* able to extend human life to 150, or even 1,500 years of age, eventually the life clock must run down and the human body must die. In late adulthood we have to face this fact more immediately and intimately than at any other stage of life. Most people in old age see the evidence of their body crumbling before their very eyes on a daily basis. Visual difficulties that are not corrected by eyeglasses increase sharply in the late seventies and eighties. By the age of eighty, 40 percent of all women have had at least one spinal fracture.¹⁰ One out of four men past eighty require treatment of urinary complications caused by an enlarged prostate.¹¹ By age eighty-five, only one person in twenty is fully mobile.¹² For the majority of the very old, things that younger people take for granted, like taking a bath, opening a jar of pickles, or walking to the neighborhood store, are fraught with difficulty and risk due to failing eyesight and hearing loss, loss of muscle mass, stiffening of joints through osteoarthritis, and brittleness of bones through osteoporosis. As one elderly woman put it: "Every morning I wake up in pain. I wiggle my toes. Good. They still obey. I open my eyes. Good. I can still see. Everything hurts but I get dressed. I walk down to the ocean. Good. It's still there. Now my day can start. About tomorrow I never know. After all, I'm eighty-nine. I can't live forever."¹³

The mind, too, is at risk, the older you get. By age eighty-five, 16 to 35 percent of Americans suffer severe cognitive impairment, half of it due to Alzheimer's disease.¹⁴ First identified in 1906 by German psychiatrists Emil Kraepelin and Alois Alzheimer, Alzheimer's disease is a neurodegenerative disease that causes a progressive loss of cognitive function and results in significant impairment of daily living. It is characterized by abnormal clumps and tangled bundles of fibers in areas of the brain responsible for memory and other mental abilities. People with Alzheimer's disease in its earliest stages have trouble remembering names, activities, and events, and may also experience difficulty solving simple math problems. In the middle stages of the disease, individuals forget how to do simple tasks like combing their hair or brushing their teeth, and have problems speaking, reading, or understanding others. In its later stages, people with Alzheimer's disease may become anxious or aggressive, wander away from home, and need around-the-clock care and supervision. People live on average about eight to ten years after diagnosis. Although there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, a number of interventions have been studied that might delay or minimize its symptoms, including a low calorie diet, a regimen of lifelong learning, certain vitamins and herbs (e.g., vitamin E and ginkgo biloba), and a range of prescription medicines. While there are debates about whether Alzheimer's disease is really a disease or just another feature of aging (half of all individuals by the age of ninety have it), it seems clear that people who are diagnosed with it experience a significant loss in their ability to experience life. According to one rehabilitation specialist, "[W]hat seems lost in the mind of the Alzheimer patient is that very detail—the bitter aftertaste of coffee, a fork laid on a plate, the sound of the kitchen door latch falling into place, that accumulation of concrete experience by which we know life . . . [W]hat seems to be lost to the Alzheimer victim, piece by piece, is sense experience, the concrete particulars of the past, until there is only the present, blurred, incomprehensible."¹⁵ This recalls Shakespeare's evocation of late adulthood: "Last scene of all, / That ends this strange eventful history, / Is second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."¹⁶

One of the greatest fears among the elderly is that serious illness or disability will make it impossible to do everyday tasks like climb stairs, dress without help, or go to the bathroom unassisted. A survey of women seventy-five years of age and older revealed that nearly all were willing to trade off almost their entire life expectancy to avoid a hip fracture that would result in being admitted to a nursing facility.¹⁷ In other words, they'd rather die than go into a nursing home. If and when that fateful day comes, total dependency on others looms as a frightening prospect. One physician writing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* expresses this from the caregivers' point of view, noting that a day finally comes for many adult children of aging parents when they are confronted with behaviors that require some kind of immediate response: "We simply have to do something. . . . He's always knocking things over and falling . . . she thinks I'm her dead sister."¹⁸

As a result, many elderly people are sent to nursing homes, continuing-care facilities, or other assisted-living settings.¹⁹ Almost a quarter of those eighty-five and older and about half of those ninety-five and older are in nursing homes. Anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff has noted that unlike at birth or adolescence, we have few rites of passage for the elderly as they move into this new phase of dependency on others.²⁰ There are no "coming-of-age" ceremonies that mark the day when they finally give up the family home, or transfer property and privilege to their children, or relinquish their driver's license, or enter into an institution. Instead, these things just happen to them without their being able to grieve the losses and without their being able to acknowledge the changes that are happening to them. Once in a nursing home, the elderly may be treated with little dignity or even abused. According to a congressional study, one nursing home in three has severe deficiencies that endanger people's health or their lives. Its author, U.S. Representative Henry Waxman, said: "We found examples of residents being punched, choked or kicked by staff members or other residents."²¹

Even if they are lucky and instead "age in place" (e.g., live in their own homes and apartments), many elderly risk entering a twilight zone of

invisibility and experiencing derision in a society that values productivity and youth, qualities that are in short supply among the aged. We have a ready-made set of pejorative terms to describe people in late adulthood who block our way walking down the street, keep us waiting impatiently at checkout counters in supermarkets, or veer into our lane on a freeway: gaffer, old fogey, codger, geezer, galoot, old fart, curmudgeon, fuddy-duddy. In Australia, the elderly are called "wrinklies." In Japan, the young call an old man an *umeboshi baba*: a dried old plum. Very old people are significantly devalued in market-based economies like ours. They're not going to be buying luxury homes, fancy cars, or other status symbols since their priorities have changed from impressing their neighbors to appreciating or coping with the little time they have left on earth. They're not up on the latest trends of fashion and culture since they think more about the past than of what will be trendy long after they're dead. As noted earlier, the very old even use fewer health care services than middle agers who are more likely to get expensive heart bypass operations and plastic surgery. So from a marketing point of view, what good are they? Add to this litany of social negatives the fact that old people remind us of death, something most people don't even want to think about. As Shakespeare observed: ". . . men shut their doors against a setting sun."²²

It's no wonder, then, that rates of depression are higher in late adulthood than at any other stage of life except adolescence. Although community surveys reveal only 3 percent of elderly people qualify for a diagnosis of major depression, almost 20 percent are found to have significant depressive symptoms, and as many as half of the elderly in long-term care suffer from depression at some time.²³ Old people who take care of spouses suffering from dementia are at especially high risk for depression, as are those who have lost a spouse during the previous year (the mean age for becoming a widow is sixty-six, and for becoming a widower is sixty-nine). Suicide rates are higher among the elderly than for any other age group. Those most at risk, older white men, have six times the national average suicide rate. Tragically, depression remains untreated in up to 90 percent of depressed

elders.²⁴ Studies suggest that 20 percent of old people who kill themselves have visited their doctors *that very day*, 40 percent in the same week, and 70 percent within a month of their suicide. Even among those elderly who do not commit suicide, untreated depression increases the death rate by more than 50 percent independent of their physical health, and raises the risk of dying after a heart attack by a factor of five.²⁵ It appears that physical illness and depression interact in a downward spiral reinforcing each other: Persistent or severe illness raises the risk of depression, which increases the risk for further illness, leading to more depression, and so on.²⁶ The sense of hopelessness and futility experienced by many older people has been articulated by French philosopher Jean Amery, who writes, "[Old people] look into their space to see what it will be like after them: a house where children and their children's children will be active and will work; a tombstone, gray and powerful will testify for them . . . but the house will deteriorate and the grandchildren will be scattered to all the winds . . . House and home . . . and tomb, everything will be like the nights of love and pain of the deceased: as good as if they had never existed."²⁷

HONORING THE HISTORICAL MIND

That the elderly should despair as they do and be denigrated by the society they have supported for much of their lives is a tragedy of King Lear proportions. After having spent their lives acquiring experiences, storing up knowledge, and gaining wisdom, they look up from their hard-won collection of inner riches to discover that nobody around them seems to care. Yet, here in these time-ripened personalities lies a treasure of incomparable value: the historical mind. Old people have direct and immediate access to memories of long past events that sophisticated historians can only guess at with their theories, books, and lectures. When the oldest documented person in the world, the Frenchwoman Jeanne Calment, died in 1997 at the age of 122, it was revealed that she had met Vincent van Gogh as a child. What a marvel to contemplate that someone in our own time should have touched history in this intimate way! Many of our own elders have had experiences, though perhaps less dramatic

or distant in time, that are nevertheless significant connections with the atmosphere of other times, inaccessible to the rest of us: experiences of past wars, revolutions, depressions, cultural upheavals, and contact with great individuals of the past.

Consider, for example, your own grandparents or great-grandparents who attended lectures or concerts as children where they saw and heard famous actors, politicians, musicians, orators, or writers who are now long dead. Eighty-five-year-olds living today (this was written in 2007) were entering their twenties at a time when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Orson Welles's film *Citizen Kane* was released, and the word *antibiotic* was first coined. More compellingly, they lived through times that had quite a distinctly different feel in contrast to today's world: times where everything from outdoor lighting and telephone communication to cultural values and intellectual trends were qualitatively different from current experience. Here, for example, are some reminiscences of Carolyn Peery, a ninety-nine-year-old African American, who shared her memories and some old photographs with cultural historian Studs Terkel: ". . . Here's a picture of my mother-in-law. She was born into slavery. She was six years old when freedom was declared. . . . My mother-in-law remembered seeing the slaves get behind the door, jumping up and down, saying 'God bless Mr. Lincoln. God bless Mr. Lincoln.'"²⁸

Individuals in late adulthood have historical access not just to one era, but to a succession of eras and the events and trends that accompanied them, which gives them a sense of the big picture. Younger people are awed and shaken up as they go through events for the first time, whereas older people have seen them come and seen them go, and then seen them come once again. They have a longer view of history and a broader scope on current events. They hold the memory of a culture, its mores, its values, its treasures, and its misfortunes better than anyone else. There is no way to replicate this kind of expertise at an earlier age. You can't manufacture experience out of nothing. You've got to do the time. And people in late adulthood have done the time. That's one of the reasons why traditional cultures and their mythic heroes have so often consulted the very old for

advice on important matters; why, for example, Agamemnon turned to the aged Nestor for advice on winning the Trojan War, or why Odysseus followed the advice of the ageless blind seer Teiresias for getting back home to Ithaca.

Significantly, studies in cognitive science suggest that while the short-term memories of the elderly may deteriorate as they age, particularly when dementias are present, their long-term memories, especially for far distant events in their past, actually become more acute in some cases.²⁹ Though they may have difficulty remembering what they had for breakfast that morning, they can vividly recall the color of the leaves the autumn when they went off to college as a youth. Arthur Freeman was an eighty-six-year-old former civil service employee who suffered from severe dementia, experiencing delusions, violent outbursts, and short-term memory problems. But when asked about his childhood, he began to share how he played by the river when he was a child: "Yes we had both sides of the river itself . . . there was one part there were . . . er . . . trees, we played in there, and there was stones between the trees and the grass. There was stones running with the water. Oh many times we plunged across the . . . water . . . the bricks, stones piled like this. Plenty of bricks like that. We were running across those, across the river."³⁰ Although riddled with syntactic and semantic errors, Freeman's narrative shows a detailed memory for long passed events.

Researchers refer to this capacity of older adults to remember events early in their lives as the "reminiscence bump" and report that these memories often tend to cluster around events in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. These were the stages of life when the individual was forming a personal identity and represent those times when they essentially became themselves as contributing members of society. It could be that this renewed memory among elders for seminal events in their youth confers advantages to cultures or even to the species as a whole. Those who possess this trait can pass on vital information to younger people before they die about how they created themselves in youth, and in the process share how they learned to maintain the coherence of their culture.

Interestingly, recent studies suggest that the memories of individuals in late adulthood are actually sharper in countries where the elderly are highly valued, such as China, compared to those cultures where the old are neglected or denigrated.³¹ At the same time, vocabulary skills continue to stay robust until the early eighties. In one study, people at age eighty-one performed at a higher level on vocabulary tests than people at age twenty-five.³² Hence, both memory for distant events and the ability to communicate these memories verbally are optimal in late adulthood for many individuals. This may explain why very old people are so often the storytellers and cultural guardians of society. As Simone de Beauvoir writes about the people of Bali: "The elderly men work little: they talk and chew betel. But they have many duties—they direct the village assembly, practice medicine, tell tales, and teach the young poetry and art . . . Their opinion is asked on every subject."³³

THE SPIRITUAL LIVES OF ELDERS

Liberated from the workaday roles of conventional society, people in late adulthood are free to stand apart from the society and serve as the feisty Socrates, the stormy Jeremiah, or the healer-crone Mother Teresa of their culture. As one eighty-six-year-old woman stated: "Now I don't care a bit about what people think . . . I dare to go out biking or walking in [X-town] wearing torn stockings, I couldn't do that before. . . . Sometimes I think, but I really can't do this, you know . . . but I do it anyway."³⁴ New avenues of creativity are opened up as elders begin to realize latent potentials and remember forgotten abilities. Perhaps it is here, almost at life's end, when the light of destiny originally silenced by the angel of forgetfulness in prebirth finally begins to shine once again. Jungian analyst Florida Scott-Maxwell writes of this newly born power discovered late in life: "[a] secret we carry is that though drab outside-wreckage to the eye . . . inside we flame with a wild life that is almost incommunicable."³⁵ It may have been this fire that prompted Grandma Moses to begin painting at seventy-eight, Kin Narita and Gin Kanie to launch a singing career in Japan at age 100, and Su Juxian to publish his first book of poetry in China at age 104. As

author Joan M. Erikson, the wife of Erik Erikson, put it: "I am profoundly moved, for I am growing old and feel shabby, and suddenly great riches present themselves and enlighten every part of my body and reach out to beauty everywhere."³⁶

Approaching the end of life, people in late adulthood have an unparalleled view of life's horizon as they peer into the mysteries beyond. Old age brings with it access to a wider scope of being; to the collective unconscious of the psyche; to the transpersonal realms of human existence. Among the Fon of Benin in West Africa the oldest living man is said to be "between the two worlds of the living and the dead."³⁷ In a study of western China completed in the 1930s, the aged of both sexes were found to be intensely interested in their afterlives, cultivating spiritual knowledge in preparation for ancestorhood.³⁸ The myths and stories of many cultures speak of this opening to spirituality late in life. Psychiatrist Allan B. Chinen has examined fairy tales from world literature that depict older persons living in great outer poverty who by chance stumble upon something supernatural. He shares, for example, the Japanese tale of Princess Moonlight, a story about an old couple who find a child embedded in a stalk while they are cutting bamboo. They raise her as their own and she grows up to become the most beautiful and radiant lady in the land. Men come from all over to woo her, including the emperor himself, but she refuses them and finally reveals to the couple that she is really a celestial being and must return to heaven. They spend the rest of their days looking up at her shining among the stars.³⁹ This enchanting tale reminds me of the life of renowned author Iris Murdoch, who after developing Alzheimer's disease, used to enjoy watching the British children's TV show *Teletubbies*. At the end of each episode, a joyful baby's face appears in the sky as the sun. Her husband, John Bayley, reported: "Iris always returned its beaming smile."⁴⁰

Young children and the very old share the experience of living at life's borders where the transpersonal life is more active than at any other time. As a result, people in late adulthood often recover a spiritual outlook on life by going back to remembrances of experiences in childhood. As an eighty-six-year-old woman related to a gerontology researcher, "You go

back to childhood almost daily. It comes without reflection. I talked to a good friend about this . . . We both go back to the town where we grew up [in our thoughts] . . . Childhood means much more than one thinks. I go back to it all the time."⁴¹ Jungian analyst Frances Wickes wrote about a dream she had when she was just a three-year-old that continued to influence her into her nineties: "I am in a high meadow, unknown yet strangely familiar. In its center is Behemoth: huge, terrifying, evil. By his side, unafraid and rooted in its own serenity, is a single bluet, that smallest flower of meadow or woodland, tiny, fragile, perfect in its four-petaled innocence." This dream, she wrote, "lived on in the psyche of an old, old woman until it blossomed into a faith by which, in her old age she lived; a faith in life itself, to which she sought to give testimony."⁴²

Unfortunately, caregivers usually ignore these transpersonal experiences in late adulthood, just as parents and teachers dismiss transpersonal experiences in early childhood. In fact, most of the strengths that we've enumerated above as part of late adulthood—the historical mind, the broad sweep of perspective, the active storytelling abilities, the cultural guardianship, and the spiritual or transpersonal vision—in other words, the truly vital functions that old people have traditionally carried out in many cultures, are viewed as insignificant in the modern Western world. With more and more people reaching older ages in our culture, the singular wisdom that was the prerogative of those rare individuals who made it into old age in earlier times has lost its cachet, just as a precious metal or gem loses much of its value when it becomes possible to synthesize mass quantities of it. Moreover, the historical or cultural mind of the elderly has less value in a culture that turns increasingly to video, the Internet, or other media for high-impact reporting of historical and cultural events. Also, we live in a culture that is always changing, so the need to have elders around to maintain the sense of continuity in a long cultural tradition has largely disappeared. Finally, because we live in a materialistic culture—one where greed rules even where the churches are strong—there is little interest in the spiritual experiences of old people that may transcend conventional religious traditions and beliefs. Reflecting on the ways in which the wisdom

of our elders has been marginalized, we have to ask ourselves, may it not be our *culture* that is deteriorating more than our elders? And if this is the case, then what great treasures are being lost because we ignore what they have to say to us?

SUMMING UP A LIFE

The greatest gift we can give to our elders is our attention: We simply must learn to *listen* to them once again. More than thirty years ago, psychiatrist Robert Butler coined the term *life review* to describe what he believed was a naturally occurring and universal mental process among the elderly to revive past experiences. He regarded the life review as the attempt of the very old to reintegrate memories, especially those involving conflict, into their current lives.⁴³ When I was a teacher in my mid-twenties, I used to visit an elderly French-Canadian woman named Bella who lived alone in her apartment in Montreal. She would cook me dinner, offer Cinzano to drink afterward (I declined, being a nondrinker), and then proceed to tell me about her life. Much of it had been difficult: Her son had died young, her husband had been much older and distant, she had regretfully left her spiritual teacher. And yet, through the telling of her story, she seemed to be working toward some kind of reconciliation and acceptance of her conflicted life.

Unfortunately, most of us regard the seemingly endless reminiscing of old people as a nuisance. We'd like to cut our visits to parents or grandparents short so that we can tend to our busy lives. Nevertheless, they persist in their ruminations about a moment of triumph or terror in a foreign war, or the time they missed a promotion with General Electric, or the day they received an award for their prize petunias at the state fair. Sometimes we even mistake their going on about the past with the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. And yet the gift of attention that we give to our elders can be very healing. Having reached the end of their lives, people in late adulthood ask themselves: Did my life have any meaning? According to Erik Erikson, the answers they receive from this question will help determine whether they feel a sense of integrity about their lives, or

instead, fall into *despair*. If a person can accept his life as something that *had to be*, says Erikson, then it becomes possible to face death without fear.⁴⁴

Sometimes this acceptance is given visible form in a significant way at the very end of life as a kind of “swan song.” This expression arises out of the Greek legend that the swan, which doesn’t actually sing, is capable of giving voice to something like a song near the end of its life. Socrates believed that the song was a joyful one because it signaled that the swan was soon to join Apollo, the god of poetry and music that it served. At the end of Homer’s epic, the father of Odysseus, Laertes, who is now an old man, dons the armor of his youth and joins his son and grandson in a swan song of last battle. The expression *swan song* has now come to be associated with the last work, or nearly final work, of a poet, composer, artist, or other creative person. It is generally seen as an attempt to sum up their creative lives in works that may be infused with great power or tinged with resignation, serenity, triumph, or acceptance. The Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, for example, had a successful career writing symphonies and other works, but apparently produced no new compositions during the last three decades of his life until it was discovered that in his ninety-second year he took up his composer’s pen one final time to orchestrate a song from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* entitled, “Come Away, Death.”⁴⁵ Another example can be seen in the life of African-American dancer and actor Josephine Baker, whose performances captivated Parisian audiences in the 1920s but whose career went into decline in the following decades. In 1975, however, at the age of sixty-eight, she returned to Paris to star in a retrospective show celebrating her fifty years in the theater. The show opened to rave reviews. A week later, she died in bed from a cerebral hemorrhage with glowing newspaper reviews spread around her.

Swan songs also show up in the lives of so-called ordinary people. One beautiful example appears in Akira Kurosawa’s magnificent film *Ikiru*. The protagonist is a lifeless bureaucrat who has toiled away in a meaningless job at the Tokyo City Hall for several decades, only to discover late in life that he has terminal stomach cancer. This realization ultimately shocks him into one final redemptive act to make up for his years of shallowness

and self-absorption: He helps to create a children’s playground on what was once a stagnant pond. Similarly, in the lives of our elderly relatives or friends, a swan song might be a last effort to support a worthy cause, a gift given in one’s last days, or a small act of kindness before dying. It may be that in late adulthood such simple acts serve as a way of signaling that a human being has finally achieved some sort of rapprochement with life and with death. With the great adventure of life behind them, and the mystery of the unknown before them, such swan songs may be among the most poignant and precious manifestations of the human condition. We turn to that final mystery now in the next chapter, and examine the human encounter with death.



THE GIFT OF LATE ADULthood: WISDOM

When I was thirteen and lived for a year with my grandmother, I used to mercilessly tease one of my cousins, who would get angry, cry, and stomp around the room in a fury. Instead of scolding me, Nana would give me a compassionate look and say in a kindly way, “Don’t make her look *ugly*!” To this day, I can still hear the precise way in which she pronounced that word, and in that sound I hear the wisdom of my elders speaking. Sadly, it seems that much of the news about the elderly in today’s world is negative, focusing on Alzheimer’s disease, depression, abuse, poverty, and neglect. We seem to have forgotten that in past times, older people were regarded as the repositories of cultural wisdom. By late adulthood, people have done a lot of living. They’ve had successes and failures, made mistakes and discovered solutions, undergone a wide range of life events, and met up with many different types of people along the way. This rich tapestry of experience is mirrored in the aging brain, which holds a wealth of neural networks forged from innumerable interactions with life. These ancient minds see beyond the fads, trends, and moods that captivate the young. They cut through to the deeper moral, aesthetic, and spiritual truths of life. Such wisdom is

very much needed in a society that values quick sound bites and snappy one-liners. Instead of dismissing our elders by fitting them into convenient stereotypes of decrepitude, we ought instead to listen to what they have to say to us. Perhaps we will discover that their wisdom slows us down a bit and makes us think about what is really important in life in the long run.

The gift of wisdom is available to us at any time in our lives. We see this wisdom in the young child who asks timeless questions. We see it in the adolescent who desires to penetrate through adult hypocrisy and get to the essential truth of things. We see it in the midlife adult who gains new insight from having reevaluated his past in midcareer. In a sense, we all possess an "inner elder" that helps direct our lives. It's that part of ourselves that resides above our daily actions and calmly observes what we're doing against the backdrop of a larger perspective. If we're inwardly quiet, we can hear wisdom's voice speaking to us even in moments of turmoil or despair. To help develop our inner wisdom, we can meditate, pray, read texts from sacred traditions, keep a journal of our deepest thoughts, or spend time in nature or other sacred settings. But one of the best ways to discover wisdom in ourselves is to spend time with people who are themselves wise. And in many cases, it is among the very old that we will find the wisest among us. By paying attention to their words, their glances, and even the most trivial of their actions, we can begin to see what a full life really looks like and use this image of sagacity to help direct the course of our own journey through life.

WAYS TO EXPLORE AND SUPPORT LATE ADULTHOOD

FOR YOURSELF

- Look at yourself in a mirror and imagine what you will look like when you are very old.
- Determine what specific risk factors you must eliminate (e.g., smoking, drinking), and what positive life style choices you need to initiate (e.g., exercise, diet) in order to have good health in late adulthood. Then, initiate a consistent plan.

- Make concrete plans to help ensure that you will be well cared for in your final years of life, by considering long term care insurance, making sound financial investments, and investigating the range of living options available to you as you grow old.

FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILY

- Help an elderly family member or friend record her life story in some way through audio or videotape, writings, photos, or a scrapbook of memorabilia.
- Pay visits to elderly friends or relations who are physically, emotionally, or mentally ailing and provide them with cheer, conversation, or silent support.
- Regularly write, call, or send flowers or other tokens of affection to elderly friends or family members who are not living in your area and have few social contacts.

FOR THE COMMUNITY

- Volunteer to visit the elderly in a nursing home or other assisted living facility, and listen to their stories, sing songs, help with hobbies, or provide other forms of encouragement and support.
- Contribute to organizations that are dedicated to fighting ageism and that support the rights of the elderly.
- Report instances of elder abuse that you may learn about in your community to the appropriate authorities.

