

## Learning to Love Growing Old

**Fear of aging speeds the very decline we dreadmost.**

By: Jere Daniel

Fear of aging speeds the very decline we dread most. And it ultimately robs our life of any meaning. No wonder there's an attitude shift in the making.

Technically, they are still baby boomers. But on the cusp of 50, much to their surprise, having come late into maturity, they can suddenly envision themselves becoming obsolete, just as their fathers, mothers, grandparents, uncles, and aunts did when they crossed the age 65 barrier, the moment society now defines as the border line between maturity and old age.

Although they may be unprepared psychologically, they are certainly fortified demographically to notice the problems their elders now face -- isolation, loneliness, lack of respect, and above all, virtual disenfranchisement from the society they built. The number of people reaching the increasingly mythic retirement age of 65 has zoomed from about seven and a half million in the 1930s (when Social Security legislation decreed 65 as the age of obsolescence) to 34 million today. By the turn of the century, that figure will be 61.4 million.

If the boomers' luck holds out, they will be spared what amounts to the psychological torture of uselessness and burdensomeness that every graying generation this century has faced before them. In an irony that boomers will no doubt appreciate (as rebellion is an act usually reserved for the young), a revolution in attitude about age is coming largely from a corner of the population that has traditionally been content to enjoy the status quo -- a cultural elite whose median age is surely over 65.

A small but growing gaggle of experts (themselves mostly elders) -- a diverse lot of gerontologists, physicians, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, ethicists, cultural observers, and spiritual leaders -- are the vanguard of a movement to change the way society looks at and deals with growing old. They seek to have us stop viewing old age as a problem -- as an incurable disease, if you will -- to be "solved" by spending billions of dollars on plastic surgery in an attempt to mask visible signs of aging, other billions on medical research to extend the life span itself, and billions more on nursing and retirement homes as a way to isolate those who fail at the quest to deny aging.

Separately and together, this cultural elite is exploring ways to move us and our social institutions toward a new concept of aging, one they call "conscious aging." They want us to be aware of and accept what aging actually is -- a notice that life has not only a beginning and a middle but an end -- and to eliminate the denial that now prevents us from anticipating, fruitfully using, and even appreciating what are lost to euphemism as "the golden years."

"Conscious aging is a new way of looking at and experiencing aging that moves beyond our cultural obsession with youth toward a respect and need for the wisdom of age," explains Stephan Rechtschaffen, M.D., a holistic physician who directs the Omega Institute, a kind of New Age think tank that is a driving force in this attitude shift. He would have us:

- Recognize and accept the aging process and all that goes with it as a reality, a natural part of the life cycle; it happens to us all. The goal is to change the prevailing view of aging as something to be feared and the aged as worthless.
- Reverse our societal attitude of aging as an affliction, and instead of spending billions on walling off the aging, spend more to improve the quality of life among the aged.

Our denial of aging has its costs. Rechtschaffen is adamant that it is not merely our elders who suffer. Quoting the late psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, he says, "Lacking a culturally viable ideal of old age, our civilization does not really harbor a concept of the whole of life."

We now live, and die, psychologically and spiritually incomplete. It may be a troubling sense of incompleteness that most stirs an appreciation for age among the baby boomers, so unfamiliar is any sense of incompleteness to the generation that invented the

possibility of and has prided itself on "having it all."

Participants in the movement range from Shetwin Nuland, M.D., surgeon-author of the surprise best-seller *How We Die*, to Betty Friedan, who has dissected American attitudes toward aging in her latest book, *Fountain of Youth*, to spiritualist Ram Dass, Columbia University gerontologist Rence Solomon, Ph.D., and Dean Ornish, M.D., director of the University of California's Preventive Medicine Research Institute.

Until now, the conventional wisdom has been that only the aged, or those approaching its border, worry about its consequences: rejection, isolation, loneliness, and mandated obsolescence. Only they care about how they can give purpose to this final stage of their lives.

Sherwin Nuland has clear evidence to the contrary. His book, *How We Die*, paints a shimmeringly lucid and remarkably un sentimental picture of death -- the process and its meaning to the dying and to those around them. The biggest group of readers of this best-seller? Not the elderly, as most observers, and even the author himself, had anticipated. It's the baby boomers. Curiosity about age and death is booming among the boomers.

"The baby boomers, who started out rejecting the wisdom and experience of anyone over 30, are buying my book in droves," Nuland told *Psychology Today*. "To young people, death is an abstract concept. But face-to-face with aging parents and illnesses like cancer and strokes among themselves, newly-graying baby boomers stare into their own mortality totally unprepared. Now this best-educated of all our generations wants information and doesn't want to turn away from what it's been trying to escape -- the effects of getting old."

We fear and deny aging, the Omega experts emphasize, because we fear and deny death. "In our denial of death and the aging of the body, we have rejected the wisdom of the aged, and in doing so have robbed old age of its meaning and youth of its direction," Rechtschaffen asserts. We pretend that old age can be turned into a kind of endless middle age, thereby giving young people a false road map to the future, one that does not show them how to plan for their whole life, gain insight into themselves, or to develop spiritually.

The signs of denial and anxiety over aging permeate every aspect of our lives. We have no role models for growing old gracefully, only for postponing it. For example:

- The vast dependence on plastic surgery specifically to hide the visual signs of aging is arguably the sharpest index of our anxiety. In just two decades, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the number of rhytidectomies, wrinkle-removing face-lifts, rose from 60,000 to an estimated 2 million a year at an annual cost of \$10 billion.
- The negative view of aging is disastrously reinforced by the media. Articles and advertising never show a mature model, even in displaying fashions designed for women over 50. A *Newsweek* cover of a sweating, gray-haired young man bears the cover line, "Oh God... I'm really turning 50." Nursing home ads ask: "What shall we do about Mother?" By some sleight of mind, we not only come to accept these images, we come to expect them as truths.

We denigrate aging, Friedan persuasively notes, by universally equating it with second childhood, "so negatively stereotyped that getting old has become something to dread and feel threatened by." A series of studies by psychologists Ellen Langer, Ph.D. of Harvard and University of Pennsylvania President Judith Rodin, Ph.D. (then at Yale) suggests how we grow to revile our aging selves.

Influenced by the fairy tales we hear as children, and what we see on television and hear in everyday life, we develop negative stereotypes about aging by the time we are six years old, the same age we develop negative stereotypes about race and sex. These stereotypes persist as we grow up, completely unaware that we even acquired them or granted them our unconditional acceptance. With our understanding of the subject forever frozen, we grow into old age assuming the stereotypes to be true. And we live down to them.

If there is a single myth about aging that most symbolizes our dread, it is the assumption that our memory will inevitably decline in old age. In a stunning new study, psychologist Langer has demonstrated that it is our own psychology -- the near-universal expectation of memory loss -- that actually brings that fate upon us. The lesson to be learned is an extraordinary one: Fear of aging is the single most powerful agent creating exactly what we fear.

The negative stereotypes acquired in childhood parade across the adult life span as expectations. As people age, Langer finds, low expectations lead to "decreased effort, less use of adaptive strategies, avoidance of challenging situations, and failure to seek medical attention for disease-related symptoms."

In a study, Langer and Harvard colleague Rebecca Levy, Ph.D., confirm the effect of these negative stereotypes on aging Americans. Using standard psychological measurements of memory, the researchers studied two populations of people who hold their elders in high esteem -- elderly mainland Chinese and older, deaf Americans -- and compared them to a group of elderly mainstream Americans. In addition, the researchers compared memory retention in the elderly with younger people in all three groups.

Not only did the mainland Chinese and American deaf far outperform the mainstream Americans on four psychological memory tests, but the oldest in these two groups, especially the Chinese, performed almost as well as the youngest. Their performance was so strong even the researchers were surprised. They conclude that the results can be explained entirely by the fact that the Chinese have the most positive, active, and "internal" image of aging across the three cultures studied.

What is particularly striking about the Langer-Levy study is that it meticulously tracks how our fears, which are so culturally constructed, become self-fulfilling prophecies. "The social, psychological component of memory retention may be even stronger than we believed."

Just as our fear of memory loss can create actual memory decline, the dread of aging may be taking its toll on many other body systems.

The current collective view of aging is so relentlessly negative that neither our social institutions nor the aging themselves believe what worldwide research points to--that those of us alive today may be aging better than our parents.

A landmark, 15-year longitudinal study of older people, begun in 1970 by Alvar Svanborg in the industrial city of Gothenburg, Sweden, showed no measurable decline in many body functions until after age 70, and very little decline by 81. Cognitive abilities were intact to at least age 75, and still intact in almost all who had reached 81, although speed at rote memory declined. "The vitality of old people in Sweden today, among the longest-lived people in the world, seems to be greater than it was only five or 10 years ago," Svanborg asserts.

American studies of healthy people aging in their own communities, as opposed to those shunted off to institutions, failed to show evidence of decline in intelligence, cognitive skills, and even memory that had appeared in all previous cross-sectional studies of aging. The combined thrust of the studies of "normal aging" is inescapable. Physical and mental decline is not inevitable. Belief that it accelerates whatever decline occurs.

Still, we continue to mythologize and denigrate aging because we devalue death itself. "We refuse even to admit that we die of old age," says Nuland, a retired Yale surgeon, whose book embodies the proposition that death is a normal stage in the life cycle. This refusal is perpetuated by the medical profession and the law. "I cannot write 'Old Age' on a death certificate even though people over 70 die because they're over 70," he says.

"An octogenarian who dies of myocardial infarction is not simply a weather-beaten senior citizen with heart disease -- he is the victim of an insidious progression that involves all of him, and that progression is called aging." Nuland says. He deplores the prevailing view of aging as a disease that can be cured and the biomedical search for a fountain of youth.

"Though biomedical science has vastly increased mankind's average life expectancy (78.6 years for American women, 71.6 for men), the maximum (114 years) has not changed in verifiable recorded history. Even the home-cultured yogurt of the Caucasus cannot vanquish nature," Nuland says. "Trying to add a few more years to the human life span is meaningless and wasteful."

The promise of an extended life span simply adds unnecessary stress to the ability to accept aging. "An extended life span without extended awareness of the possibilities of a productive old age means we aren't sure we're living longer. Maybe we're just dying longer," says Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, founder of a pioneering Spiritual Eldering Project at Philadelphia's B'nai Or Religious Fellowship. Schachter-Shalomi is the recipient of the first annual Conscious Aging Award by the Omega Institute. In place of fear of death we'd be better off with a belief in the possibilities of life, as long as it is lived.

"If age itself is defined as a 'problem,' then those over 65 who can no longer 'pass' as young are its carriers and must be quarantined lest they contaminate, in mind or body, the rest of society," Friedan asserts. So we banish the elderly from our midst and wall them off in nursing homes. We encourage them to isolate themselves in retirement homes and communities, in San Diego condos and Miami Beach hotels.

But isolating ourselves into ageist groups only sets the stage for a class warfare that is bound to get louder and more violent. Younger generations grow to resent the older, and vice versa. And so, says Nuland, the elderly grow demanding and greedy for health and custodial care while the rest of the population bemoans the financial drain the aged make on society, all the while feeling guilty for the situation.

With the old now successfully segregated out, Americans are in no position to exploit the benefits of age -- or even to recognize or acknowledge that there are any. Which brings us to the special brand of intelligence called wisdom.

Sure, we have our "eider" statesmen, but the rifles are honorary, often conferred with an underlying tinge of humor. They signify reverence for past accomplishments more than real respect for the wisdom that only elders have to contribute. Wisdom remains a very special commodity, a great natural resource that is undervalued -- and almost totally untapped in doing what it's meant for: guiding the young. And there's only one way to get it.

It is not easy to talk about wisdom without lapsing into platitudes and vagueness, so a team of European researchers -- no surprise there -- has taken on the challenge to isolate the features of wisdom in clinical detail. From their ongoing studies of the aging mind, psychologists Paul B. Baltes and Ursula M. Staudinger, both of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, define wisdom:

- It's an expertise that wraps information in the human context of life and relates it to generational and historical flow.
- It is factual and procedural knowledge about the world and human affairs.
- It mingles insight and judgment involving complex and uncertain matters of the human condition; there is an appreciation for and understanding of the uncertainties of life.
- It involves a fine-tuned coordination of cognition, motivation, and emotion, knowledge about the self and other people and society.
- It carries knowledge about strategies to manage the peaks and valleys of life.
- It integrates past, present, and future.

A product of cultural and knowledge-based factors, rather than biologically based mechanics of the mind, wisdom accumulates with time -- but only among those who remain open to new experiences. If we must insist on outwitting the constraints of biology, then wisdom -- and not the scalpel -- is our thing.

It may be that we ignore wisdom because, especially over the lifetime of the boomers, we have come to overvalue, say, rocket science. The technological advancement of modern society has bred in us an infatuation with the data we have accumulated. "We've traded information for wisdom," Rechtschaffen offers.

We have confounded the accumulation of data with its application, or even an understanding of it. Wisdom, on the other hand, always puts information back in the context of human life.

Sherwin Nuland is a man forced by the exigencies of his profession to look time squarely in the eye. Old age, he says, is a "time to become contemplative, to recognize our value to people younger than ourselves." Now in his sixties, Nuland stopped operating when "I realized I was no longer as nimble as a 45-year-old. But I expect to continue contributing my knowledge and experience as long as possible." Unfortunately, he says, "the younger generation doesn't always accept it, from me or others. They see their elders as crotchety and selfish, their maturity and wisdom of no use--outdated. Age warfare continues."

Perhaps we don't recognize the wisdom of aging because our anxiety about the future--of the world, of ourselves--has overwhelmed our respect for history. We live, Rechtschaffen says, with only a linear sense of time. We push inexorably toward the future; the past is nothing. In other eras, we lived by a more circular sense of time, which allowed for a father's, even a

grandfather's, experience to guide us. There was an intuitive apprehension -- wisdom, if you will -- that the way to deal with the future rests in an understanding of the past. Even today, many indigenous tribal societies and Eastern cultures live by a circular sense of time.

The baby boomers have made it successfully, albeit noisily, through the first two-thirds of their lives, having rejected -- indeed defying -- the teachings of their elders. But the prospect of making it through the next third satisfied with their accomplishments and their selves requires they find inner meaning in their lives.

To give their lives purpose, they might turn from what Nuland calls "the hurly-burly of getting and spending" to a more contemplative life. And they might pay more attention to those who have already crossed the border into old age, to value their experience; to embrace their elders is to embrace their future selves. Perhaps, most of all, they might begin to think of their own death. After all, to be fully alive includes being fully aware of dying.

So long as we lock ourselves into an obsession with the youth culture, we can only develop age rage and dehumanize ourselves, says Betty Friedan. Those who give up their denial of age, who age consciously, "grow and become aware of new capacities they develop while aging.... [They] become more authentically themselves."

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