*Chapter One*

# Through the Looking Glass

Getting old sucks! It always has, it always will. Yes, I know about all those books and articles extolling the wonders of what the media call the "new old age." I've been reading them for quite a while now and can only conclude that they're either written by forty-year-olds who, like children afraid of the dark, draw rosy pictures as they try to convince themselves that no unknown monsters await them. Or they're lying. Is that too harsh a word? Perhaps. Maybe it's not a lie but a wish, a hope, a need to believe there's something more to this business of getting old than we see around us.

I recall Betty Friedan's visit to San Francisco shortly after the publication of *The Fountain of Age*,[1] a book proclaiming old age as a vital time of life at the same time that she herself was unable to walk the two blocks from her hotel to the restaurant where we were to have lunch. As I helped her to her chair, I said, with all the irony at my command, "*The Fountain of Age*, huh?" She shrugged, "What would you want me to write, that it sucks? There's got to be more than that."

Not that I don't believe in the possibility of what Friedan called a "vital old age." It just seems to me to be half the story. Nor do I quarrel with her argument that for too long we've looked at old age solely through the lens of decline. But it's also true that old age—even now when old age isn't quite what it used to be —*is* a time of decline and loss. To deny that, to look away from the reality in favor of some new one-dimensional view of aging, serves us ill.

Getting old probably isn't something anyone in any society looks forward to, but for us Americans, it seems downright un-American. I was reminded anew how the distaste for aging and the old colors our national thinking, whether about social policy or television programming, when I opened my copy of the *New York Times* one morning, turned to the Op-Ed page, as I always do, and saw yet another reminder of what a trial we old folks are. There at the top of the page was a sketch of an old man dozing in his recliner and an attention-getting sidebar: "Geezers: Don't even think of getting near that remote." Just below it, in an article titled "My Plan to Save Network Television," the author, a television writer and producer, takes a satirical look at advertisers' and TV executives' pursuit of the "key demographic," people eighteen to forty-nine. He writes:

> People over 49 do not buy interesting products. They detract from the hip environment advertisers seek. . . . The fact is, mature viewers are threatening the well-being of network television. I have a bold but common-sense suggestion: old people should not be allowed to watch TV. I anticipate the predictable charges of "discriminatory," "unfair," "idiotic." Well, millions of elderly people live in age-restricted retirement communities, and you don't hear young people whining about that. Right-thinking older Americans will see this as a chance to do something for their country.

> Nurturing a nation's consumer base is as vital as protecting its streams and forests. It's time for people over 49 "to take one for the team."[2]

Tongue in cheek? Certainly. Funny? Sure. Did I smile when I read it? Yes, with tears in my eyes and anger in my heart because, like all good humor, it rests on a profound truth.

So even though we old folks have plenty of money to spend—$2 trillion a year, according to the *Times* article—we can't even get a network executive to care what we think because we don't spend it in the right places. Hmmm. Where are all those sources of personal power and self-esteem I keep hearing about as the media celebrate the glories of the "new old age"?

Our revulsion with aging, our flight from it at almost any cost, is deeply ingrained. Yes, I know "revulsion" is a strong word. But think about it: who *wants* to be old? What do you think when you look in the mirror and see the signs of your own aging? How does it make you feel? Do you want to turn away, rush off to the nearest cosmetics counter and buy up every cream that promises to remove the lines that are so distressing, run to the gym in the hope that you can stave off the sagging muscles, call the plastic surgeon your friend used? Do you say to yourself, as a fifty-year-old woman said to me when explaining why she's planning plastic surgery, "I try not to look at myself when I put my lipstick on, but sometimes I can't help it. Then I think: *That can't be me*. It's disorienting. I don't recognize that person in the mirror as me; she's not me, or at least not the image I have of me. And I want that one back. I want the outside to match the inside."

*I want the outside to match the inside*. What is that about? Why, when we've lived through so many years, overcome so many trials, does our internal image register only our younger selves? Why do we want it to? Why not some composite picture that takes in

all the changes we've gone through along the way? Why are we so appalled at the signs of aging that we're willing to undergo painful and expensive surgical procedures? Why, when people are in their last throes, are they still saying, as a friend who was close to death remarked to me a few years ago, "How can I be dying when inside I still feel like I did when I was twenty?"

In her groundbreaking book, *The Coming of Age*, written in the early 1970s, Simone de Beauvoir speaks passionately about the loss of our identity in old age, our fear of it, our inability (unwillingness?) to believe that the self we knew is gone, replaced by a loathsome stranger we can't recognize, who can't possibly be the person we've known until now. Writes de Beauvoir:

> Thinking of myself as an old person... means thinking of myself as someone else, as *an other* than myself. Every metamorphosis has something frightening about it.... But when one is young the real advantages of the adult status usually counterbalance the wish to remain oneself, unchanged. Whereas old age looms ahead like a calamity: even among those who are thought well preserved, age brings with it a very obvious physical decline.... When we look at the image of our own future provided by the old we do not believe it: an absurd inner voice whispers that *that* will never happen to us—when *that* happens it will no longer be ourselves that it happens to.[3]

Why is it so agonizingly difficult to accept? Is it simply natural to prefer youth and beauty to old age and decline? A look across cultures suggests there may be some truth in that, but if so, it doesn't explain the intensity of the aversion with which we look upon old age. Perhaps, then, it's something more complicated, something more psychological that's related to our anxiety about our mortality. Accepting our own aging may come too close to the realization that life is finite and that we'll soon reach

its limit—a truth that's extremely difficult for most Americans, perhaps most people in Western society, to bear.

But psychology doesn't stand alone, isn't given life outside of a cultural context. A core maxim of social psychology is that what we think about a person influences how we see him, how we see him affects how we behave toward him, and how we behave toward him ultimately shapes how he feels about himself, if not actually who he is. It's in this interaction between self and society that we can see most clearly how social attitudes toward the old give form and definition to how we feel about ourselves. For what we see in the faces of others will eventually mark our own.

As a sociologist, I have been a student of aging for almost four decades; as a psychologist during much of this same period, I saw more than a few patients who were struggling with the issues aging brings; as a writer, I've written about many subjects, including a memoir about old age,[4] and for the last decade or so I've been living in the territory and have talked to dozens of people about their experience of aging. Yet I didn't fully realize how much ageism had become the signature mark of oppression in our society until I began to interview people more systematically and listened to the stories they had to tell,[5] stories that forced me back on myself and my own prejudice about old people, even though I am also one of them.

*I am one of them.* Even now, after all I've learned, the words on the page bring a small shock and something inside resists. I want to take the words back, to say, "No, it's not true, I'm really not like *them*," and explain all the ways I'm different from the old woman you saw struggling up the stairs on the subway or bus this morning, the one you looked away from with a slight sense of distaste.

Old age has probably never been a comfortable place in a society that glorifies youth, but until recently we didn't live there very long. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the median

age at death was just over forty-nine years; now it's close to eighty and rising rapidly. Then, 13 percent of people who reached sixty-five would live to see eighty-five. Now, nearly half of the sixty-five-year-olds can expect to live that long.[6] Measured in evolutionary time, this near-doubling of the life span is nothing less than a demographic miracle—an astonishing, exhilarating, frightening miracle.

While the sixty-five-year-olds are coming onstage, those over eighty-five presently represent the fastest growing segment of our population, having increased their numbers by nearly 40 percent in the single decade between 1990 and 2000.[7] Even one hundred is no longer a wistful dream, for while the actual proportion of centenarians is still small, their numbers, too, are rising fast enough to suggest another miracle in the making.[8]

This book tells the story of aging in America in the twenty-first century. It's about a new stage of life, one whose path few have ever walked before. It's about the struggle to cut through the thicket of the social and psychological impediments along the way. It's about the search to find meaning and purpose as the years march on, about the deeply embedded cultural norms and expectations that hamper that search. And it's about the costs of the new longevity to those who are now old, to their children coming up behind them so quickly, to their grandchildren who are at the bottom layer of the sandwich that makes up these generations, and not least to the society that will soon be forced to make room for them.