

Chapter Two

Out of the Closet

Isometimes think the story of aging in our time is a tale of “yes, but...” Yes, the fact that we live longer, healthier lives is something to celebrate, but it’s not without its costs, both public and private. Yes, the definition of “old” has been pushed back, but no matter where we place it, our social attitudes and our private angst about getting old largely remain intact.

If a public conversation on aging is to have any value, we need to talk about how much has changed and how little, about the social and psychological meanings of living so long and how they interact with each other in a society that, at best, is ambivalent about its old. We need to think aloud about the impact of our increasingly long life span on those who follow us, about the pleasures, the pains, and the many sorrows this stage of life brings, about the gift our expanded life span has bestowed upon us and the significant costs that accompany it.

But instead of complexity, we get oversimple tales about the wonders of the “new old age,” along with treatises on “age power” and tips on how to make these “the power years.”¹ I sometimes think old age is two different countries. There’s the real old age for those of us who live there and know its conflicts and contradictions. Then there’s the old age of those who write about it,

most of them middle-aged women and men who live a long way from my country and are so frightened of coming to it that they grasp at half truths and offer them up as if they were the whole story.

Until recently, aging and old age lived largely in the social closet. But with 78 million baby boomers—that huge cohort that shaped everything it touched as it swept through society, the one that thought it would be forever young when it coined the mantra “You can’t trust anyone over thirty”—now turning sixty, silence is no longer possible.

As this best educated, most literate, and largest generation in history moves toward old age, concerns about our long life span have come center stage. Economists worry about the impact of our increasingly aging population on the nation’s productivity; politicians wring their public hands about how the old will soon bankrupt what’s left of our social welfare system; and some of the younger generations, many of whom don’t believe they’ll ever be old, complain that there will be nothing left for them. Occasionally, too, we read about the abuse of the old—a nursing home where residents are seriously mistreated, a famous family in which a 53-year-old man accuses his 82-year-old father of abusing his 104-year-old mother²—and we’re appropriately horrified.

But while the wealthy and prominent make headlines, the 1 to 3 million older Americans who are abused by their caregivers go largely unnoticed.³ For like the homeless, those who are already old are mostly not in our social sights, except maybe when they do something to call attention to themselves, like make demands on the public treasury for such things as insurance to cover prescription drugs. We have an epithet for them then: “greedy geezers,” coined a decade or so ago by then-senator Alan K. Simpson. Or when they walk irritatingly slowly as they board the bus or the subway. We’re impatient, wishing they’d get out of our

busy way, out of sight, and we look away, repelled, loath to see what could be our future.

In his highly regarded treatise, *Aging and Old Age*, Richard Posner considers “the factors that from a rational-choice perspective are likely to influence the treatment the elderly will receive from society.” It makes “biological sense,” he writes, that while we’re “genetically programmed” to protect the young, we’re not similarly wired toward protection of the old. “Inclusive fitness is unlikely to be promoted by the devotion of huge resources to the survival of persons who, by reason of advanced age, are not reproductively or otherwise productive, either actually or (like children) potentially.”⁴

Strip away the awkward language and what you have is a cold calculus that we’re not worth the cost, whatever that may be. Small wonder we so fiercely resist the idea of being old. Who wants to be invisible? Or to have so little social value? Or to be criticized as greedy when all you’ve asked for is something citizens of every other Western democracy take for granted?

Both Friedan and Posner published their work on aging in the early 1990s when it was already clear that we were witnessing a demographic revolution in the making. By 2007 it had arrived. Over 36 million Americans—12 percent of the total population—presently are over sixty-five. In the single year 2004, more than 2 million people arrived at the cusp of old age. This before the first of the baby boomers begin to reach that milestone. After that the numbers skyrocket. The Census Bureau projects that by 2050, 86.7 million people, roughly 21 percent of the projected population at that time, will be sixty-five or older. That’s an increase of 147 percent over the present number. Compare that to the population as a whole, which will have increased by only 49 percent over the same period.⁵

Given the drama of these demographics and their implication

for the future of our society and the people who live in it, it's no surprise that age is on our collective mind big time these days. Predictions vary depending on the mind-set of the predictors, on whether they see the glass as half full or half empty. The pessimists see disaster as they warn of the crises that lie in wait: The financial burdens on the social system will prove unupportable. Medicare and Social Security will go broke. The economy will falter as the nonproductive old outnumber the productive young. The burden on families will be intolerable as sixty-five-year-olds find themselves the caregivers for their eighty-five-year-old parents at the same time that they're worrying about their future and how they'll support their own old age.

Those who see a half-full glass tell us the worries are overblown. Sure, they say, the social institutions designed to ease the old age of earlier generations, whether health care, housing, or social security, are not adequate to deal with the huge aging population that looms ahead. But with the political will and sensible planning, old programs can morph into new ones that will meet the realities of our continually expanding life span.

True, the optimists grant, many sixty-five-year-olds are caring for eighty-year-old parents, but 60 percent of those over eighty continue to live independently. They agree, too, that the ratio of those over sixty-five to what we now call "the working-age population" will nearly double in the next fifty years. But, the optimists remind the pessimists, the working-age population is already being redefined upward, as witness the legislation outlawing age discrimination, the disappearance of mandatory age-based retirement in government and industry, and the increase in the age at which Americans can claim Social Security benefits. With the promise of an aging population that is heartier, healthier, and better educated than ever before, it's reasonable to assume, the optimists insist, that increasing numbers will remain in the work force.

Maybe, maybe not, the pessimists reply. Ask the 40 percent of sixty-five-year-olds who are taking care of their aged parents and you'll hear another tune. In fact, even those whose parents live independently find themselves preoccupied with their welfare, worrying about a future they know is coming, wondering how they'll manage when it does. What's more, the idea of being on the job until eighty and beyond may appeal to a Supreme Court justice or a world-famous television journalist, but is that what the average person, whose job is neither so important nor so glamorous, wants to do with these newfound years?

The arguments continue, but they're more form than content. No matter which side of the optimist/pessimist divide they fall on, everyone agrees that something new is emerging, something we might call the next life stage, the one that never existed before, the one for which we have no name and no template. We're living longer but doing it better, getting older but staying younger, and no one quite knows what to do about it—not even whether it's a blessing or a curse.

While the experts talk, those of us who are old are busy living the reality of aging in a society that worships youth and pitches it, packages it, and sells it so relentlessly that the anti-aging industry is the hottest growth ticket in town. Think that's hyperbole? Plug the term "anti-aging" into Google and you'll come up with over 3 million hits.

From the scientists tucked away in their labs who, with the aid of federal dollars, search for the key to yet a longer life, to the seventeen thousand physicians and scientists who are members of the recently spawned American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, whose Web site boasts that "aging is not inevitable" but "a treatable medical disease,"⁶ to the plastic surgeons who exist to serve our illusion that if we don't *look* old, we won't *be* or *feel* old, to the multibillion-dollar cosmetics industry whose creams and potions promise to wipe out our wrinkles and massage

away our cellulite, to the fashion designers who have turned yesterday's size ten into today's size six so that forty-year-old women can delude themselves into believing they still wear the same size they wore in college,⁷ to the media pundits who have recently taken to assuring us that sixty really isn't sixty anymore—the old and those who soon will be counted among them are big business, at least insofar as anti-aging products and services are concerned.

And if that isn't enough, the *New York Times* features a front-page article about the latest boon to the American entrepreneurial spirit:⁸ a growing array of "brain health" programs on Internet sites, in "brain gyms," workshops, and fitness camps, an increasingly robust business in "brain healthy" food, and not least, a Nintendo video game that, the instructions say, will "give your prefrontal cortex a workout." Speaking with the *Times* reporter, a spokeswoman for the American Society on Aging exclaims, "This is going to be one of the hottest topics in the next five years—it's going to be huge." Will any of it help you remember where you left your glasses, why you walked into your bedroom, or the storyline in the film you saw a few days ago? "That's the challenge," she adds. "How much science is there behind this?"

In a searing article published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Kate Scannell, a practicing geriatrician, decries the denial of aging that dominates our culture and argues that our refusal to accept the fact that "old age isn't just a state of mind but also a state of the body" has created a "compelling mythic structure" that not only obscures reality but is a great disservice to all of us, not just the old.

"We are regularly consumed with commercial messages that promote an experience of aging that is far more possible on billboards than in the three-dimensional lives of most elderly people," Dr. Scannell writes, as she tells the story of a seventy-six-year-old woman who came to see her, complaining that she

could no longer do her usual advanced set of yoga poses without discomfort. When Dr. Scannell explained to her that "losing elasticity and flexibility with aging was a natural and regularly observed human phenomenon," the patient refused to accept the idea and insisted instead that the doctor do something. "Well, just because that happens doesn't mean that it's healthy or inevitable, right?" she demanded. "It's a physical process, so there must be a supplement or hormone or something physical I can take to counteract it."

"Our culture's compulsive spinning of old age into gold," Dr. Scannell concludes, "can inflict psycho-spiritual harm when it lures people into expecting a perpetually gilded existence, with an infomercial alchemist available at every rough and turbulent bend in the road to provide correctives that keep our lives shiny."⁹ And, I might add, it hinders the development of badly needed social policies that would benefit the growing ranks of the aged. If, after all, getting old is something we can avoid, then it's not social policy that's needed to ease the problems of old age, it's personal responsibility.

In the last week alone I've read two articles, heard one radio program, and watched a TV show all proclaiming that sixty is the new forty and eighty the new sixty. Any minute I'm expecting someone out there to be redefining one hundred as advanced middle age.

Granted, given that the subject occupies my mind these days, I'm more likely than most to be tuned to it and notice every mention. But apparently it's hard for anyone to miss. An eighty-year-old friend whose body is showing serious signs of age reported with a bitter laugh that her son called one day to cheer her up with the news that he'd been watching television and heard some self-proclaimed expert talking about "the new old age."

"Can you believe it?" my friend asked. "My fifty-six-year-old son, who should know better just by looking at me these days,

called to tell me that eighty is the new sixty. And I think he believes it." She paused for a moment, sighed, then, "I was so irritated I wanted to hang up on him, then I thought, well, I guess he really needs to believe for him it will be different."

Where do these people live? I wonder. On what planet? It's certainly true that despite all the angst about graying hair, receding hairlines, expanding waistlines, sagging muscles, and failing memory, older is getting younger all the time. But sixty as the new forty?

Tell it to the fifty-five-year-old I had dinner with last night who complained that he'd had to stop running because his knees had given out.

Tell it to my friend who was looking forward to celebrating her sixtieth birthday until she got "a wake-up call" (her words, not mine) when the pain in her back was diagnosed as a degenerative disease.

Tell it to the sixty-three-year-old who, when she heard the phrase, said bitterly, "Yeah, well two good friends died recently, and that didn't happen when I was forty."

Tell it to the fifty-nine-year-old who told me how startled he was when, during a conversation about aging, his dinner companion reassured him that they needn't worry about coming up on sixty. "I couldn't believe this intelligent woman really thinks that sixty is the new forty," he exclaimed. "I'd never heard it said before, and I thought she was kidding. I actually laughed, but she was really serious. I mean, sure, I know that sixty isn't what it used to be. I still have plenty of energy—well, maybe not as much as I used to have, but it's still plenty, and I can work as hard as I ever did. But it sure as hell isn't forty. At forty I didn't have the pain that's with me most of the time now. And if my body didn't remind me that I'm closing in on sixty, the mirror does. When I see my weathered-looking face with all its wrinkles and sags, I don't

have any illusion that sixty is anything but sixty. It's different now, probably better than ever before, but still sixty."

Never mind reality; it doesn't sell. Instead we get fantasy talk about sixty being the new forty and glossy tributes to the blessings of aging. "Age has given me what I've been looking for my entire life—it gave me *me*," exclaims the writer Anne Lamott. "It provided the time and experience and failures and triumphs and friends who helped me step into the shape that had been waiting for me all my life."

Would she give it up for thinner thighs or a flatter belly? On her bad days, perhaps, but mostly her answer is: "Are you crazy?"

Sounds great, no? Who can argue with the experience of growing into a self you like and respect? Who would say it isn't one of the gifts of getting older? But she was forty-nine when she wrote those words, middle-aged by today's definition, and coming to terms with oneself is what that life stage is all about. As I write today, a forty-nine-year-old can expect to inhabit this middle stage for the next fifteen or twenty years and, if she's lucky, healthy, and open to the experience, these can be vital, growing years.

But then comes "the new old age," when Ms. Lamott and her peers will confront the next twenty or thirty years and giving up thinner thighs is the least of their worries. "Every one of my friends loves being older," she enthuses. "My Aunt Gertrude is eighty-five and leaves us behind in the dust when we hike." Maybe so, but I wonder how Aunt Gertrude feels when she goes home alone to nurse her sore muscles, eat her solitary dinner, and count up her losses that lie next to the pleasure of the hike.

It's time for something more, something besides our fantasies and denials, something besides the one-sided media representations about all the ways of being old that are supposedly open to us now: the seventy-six-year-old who runs the Boston Mara-

thon in respectable time, the eighty-five-year-old who plays a mean game of tennis every day, the former president who parachutes from a plane to celebrate his eightieth birthday, the eighty-one-year-old who climbs El Capitan in Yosemite, the ninety-two-year-old who still has an eye for the women and the wherewithal to do something about it, the eighty-two-year-old who sells her first painting.

I know these possibilities. I am the eighty-two-year-old who sold that painting. And I know the complex of feeling and fear that drives people to such adventures in their old age, the deep-seated need for something to give meaning to a life, the illusion that if we climb one more mountain we can control not just life but death as well.

Like Aunt Gertrude, I love it when I can match or best a younger companion in the outdoors, or when I see some fifty-year-old huffing and puffing on his treadmill at the gym when I haven't broken a real sweat. But these are transient moments of triumph that live next to the more permanent realizations about the diminishing self that old age brings.

This isn't to say that the heroic feats of the old don't deserve celebration, that they aren't useful in offering up an image of what may be possible. But while we applaud, it's well to remember that it's the rare person at any age, let alone old age, who has the will or the wherewithal—whether internal resources or financial freedom—to even think about climbing mountains and jumping from planes.

What's more, when the media turn their attention to other excitements and our fifteen minutes of fame has passed, we're left alone to contemplate the reality that, no matter how inspiring the accomplishment, no matter how much notice it gets, having achieved the goal we still face the question that haunts all of us who are confronting a very long old age: "Now what?"

Yes, "Now what?" That's the big question no one is asking.

What if those scientists working in their labs actually find the key to the fountain of youth? What if we could live to 125? How will we live those years? What will we do with them? What will sustain us—emotionally, economically, physically, spiritually? Who will we become? These, not just whether the old will break the Social Security bank, are the central questions about aging in our time.

MASARYKOVA UNIVERZITA
Fakulta sociálních studií
Joštova 10
602 00 BRNO

