Chapter Four

Does Age Count Anymore?

If middle age is the high noon of life, old age is its sunset. Like the other stages of life these days, where it begins isn't easily marked, but the end is the one utterly predictable event in a life filled with unpredictability.

In earlier times chronological age often was irrelevant. Most people didn't really know how old they were; birth records, when they existed, were inscribed in the church or synagogue and dependent on whether the record keeper was faithful to the task. My mother, who was born in pre–World War I Russia, had only a hazy idea of her age and made up a birth date when she came through Ellis Island only because the customs agent asked for it.

It's still true in most preliterate societies today. Everyone knows when someone has lived a long time, of course; the evidence is visible in every line on the face. But unlike our own culture with its glorification of youth, the elders wear those lines comfortably, for they are the signs of wisdom, the visible reminders that the old are the carriers of the community's history. In such societies "old" is when a person becomes dependent,

can't work anymore, or can't keep up with the tribe's movements. When that happens, when, in essence, the old have served their purpose, passed on what they know, the community culture can often be no kinder than ours: the old are left behind to die.

But here, as in most Western industrialized societies, the various phases of life are marked by chronological age. So when does old age happen? Even the demographers and gerontologists keep changing their minds about what marks old age. They used to call sixty-five old, now some think of it as advanced middle age. Then it was seventy-five that became the marker for old. But that didn't work for long, so they moved it up to eighty. Oops! Not that either. The only thing left was to split "old" into new categories. Sixty-five to seventy-four became the "young old," while seventy-five to eighty-four is now the "old old." What to do with the over eighty-fives? That's easy. We make them the "oldest old."

Well, not so easy, since not everyone agrees that these are the right categories. It will no doubt pain most fifty-five-year-olds to hear that some social gerontologists lump them with the young old along with the seventy-four-year-olds, a couple of whom might well be their parents. And still others, not satisfied with only three categories of old, have come up with a fourth: "middle old." As far as I can tell, though, no one is entirely sure who fits into it.

But even those modifications were not enough to suit some of the experts who work in the field, so we now have a whole new set of classifications of the old, one that fits more neatly into our cultural abhorrence of old age by abjuring the word "old" entirely. There's the "Third Age," an ever-evolving category that, depending on who's defining it, is either a rough and open-ended expansion upward of the young old, or one that includes everyone from fifty on. But since we're living so long these days, some analysts have concluded that we need a "Fourth Age," which is

somewhat equivalent to the oldest old—that is, everyone over eighty-five.

"The idea of the Third and Fourth Age itself is undergoing change and strictly speaking is not tied to a specific age range," write Paul Baltes and Jacqui Smith. "Rather . . . [they] are dynamic and moving targets that are themselves subject to evolution and variation."[1] Which means in plain English that these are more concepts than categories, that they define an idea—the Third Age being "the big success story" of our time as exemplified by the dramatic increase in longevity whose end point we don't yet know; the Fourth Age marked by physical and mental frailty. As the number of people over one hundred, already mushrooming at a rapid rate, continues to rise, the categorizers will no doubt be back at their drawing boards. Will there be a Fifth Age? Stay tuned.

Whatever the issues and merits of each of these different kinds of classifications, the shift in thinking from the traditional age-related distinctions to something less fixed, more fluid, makes sense to me. For when we situate our old into firm chronological categories, it obscures the great variability in how individuals age, doesn't easily take account of the eighty-year-olds who are running all over town and the sixty-year-olds who can't make it to the corner store.

Unfortunately, however, the new categories don't provide much more light than the old ones. If frailty, whether physical or mental, is the defining feature separating the Third from the Fourth Age, it means we'd have to put the ninety-year-old who still functions well on both counts into the same category as the sixty-five-year-olds. Not something that makes sense in the real world, no matter how well a ninety-year-old may be holding up.

Which leads me to ask: What is it that makes it so hard to keep two thoughts in our minds at the same time? Why do we have to think in opposites, one side against the other? Varia-

tion exists among the old, perhaps more so than in other groups —and so do commonalities. If we insist on variability as the singular defining factor, we leave ourselves with nothing to say, since every generalization we make about old age—what it is, when it happens, how people feel about it—will be contradicted by those individuals who don't fit the pattern. The task, then, is to find the path between the individual and the general, some place where our analysis recognizes variation but also leaves us able to make general statements.

My husband, who just turned ninety, doesn't like being old any better than I do, but he handles it with a graceful acceptance I doubt I'll ever manage. I stamp my foot and rage at fate because his memory is failing, his mind losing its edge. He's saddened by what's happening to him, gets momentarily frustrated when he can't remember how to do some simple task, but ultimately comes down on the side of, "I'm lucky to be able to do as well as I can." I push against the limits, grumble about getting tired when I didn't before, about not being able to walk as far or as long as I could a few years ago. He smiles and says, "But look how far you can still walk."

I don't want to hear his reassurance; I want to shake him, make him join me in my angry resistance. He wishes I'd calm down, be quiet, and let him enjoy his time in peace. But the differences in how we manage the day-to-day pressures of getting old fade into insignificance when compared to the shared experience of what it *means* to get old, our mutual understanding of the painful and difficult realities of this time of life.

My argument, then, is that alongside the variability lie deeply felt commonalities that bind people of a similar age together no matter how different they may appear on the outside or how their temperaments may vary. I saw it in live action during one recent holiday weekend when I went to a block party with people ranging from two months to ninety years and watched similar-

aged people come together like homing pigeons. Never mind that some sixty-year-olds looked ten years older and some ten years younger; never mind that a couple of seventy-five-year-olds looked older than my ninety-year-old husband. They were bound together by the common experiences of their age and life stage. The sixty-year-olds were preoccupied with retaining their youthful vigor at the same time they were wondering whether it was time to slow down, to "cut back." Those fifteen and twenty years ahead of them were discussing, among other aging problems, the difficulties of already having cut back or having been cut out altogether.

True, I'm especially sensitive to such conversations these days, and I probably encouraged them, eager as I am to hear what people have to say. But I didn't push anyone into the subject; I just listened to what was already being said and made a remark or asked a question when the opportunity presented itself.

I see it also in my responses and reactions to the people I meet in this work—and theirs to me. Although we're strangers when we meet, I soon find myself feeling an affinity with them, a kind of oneness that goes even deeper than empathy, something that resides in the core of our mutual understanding about the trials of old age, a bonding that comes with recognizing so many of their thoughts as my own, the knowledge that, even with those who experience this stage of life with greater ease than I do, there's an understanding that transcends the differences.

There are, of course, important differences among the old as well, differences that separate them by virtue of class, culture, ethnicity, and gender. A woman who lives on the edge of poverty worries about money in ways that I do not. A person embedded in a large, extended Latino family will be less lonely, less isolated than a white counterpart whose children are on the other side of the country. A single man, no matter how old, what he looks like, or what his physical condition, is more likely to find female com-

panionship than a healthy and attractive sixty-five-year-old single woman is to have a man in her life.

Temperament, too, makes a difference. Some people accept the trials of aging philosophically, some don't. Some, the lucky ones with the will, the resources, and the talent, make a new and satisfying life for themselves, while others feel cheated and mourn the past. A man who has morphed from corporate executive into a sculptor and feels free for the first time in his life has a whole different set of experiences from the one who mourns the loss of his earlier self and has been unable to find a new one.

It seems easy to label the differences among us. Some people are resigned, some depressed, some accepting, some content with this time of life. But such labels don't do justice to the complex and contradictory sets of feelings that live inside us. They sing the lyrics, not the melody, play the movement, not the symphony.

A friend tells me that she feels good, sometimes even happy, with the life she's made as a widow at eighty, and speaks of the pleasures of being able to live these years unfettered by the ambitions and internal strife that dominated her before. Even though I haven't found her level of acceptance, I know what she means: the relief in giving up the strivings, the moments of pure pleasure in a beautiful sunset, the smell of the ocean, the smile of a great-grandchild—moments that passed before you could savor them fully when you had to move on to the next thing. Physically, however, we switch places. She worries about every new pain, rushes off to the doctor hoping she'll tell her it's not serious and make it go away. I take them as they come, assuming that they're the natural accompaniment of old age. Which of us is resistant, which accepting?

No matter what label we affix, when we look more closely we see that the resigned also resist, the depressed know joy, the accepting struggle, the content are well acquainted with unhappi-

ness. And more. Whatever the variations in temperament and experience that make for differences among the old, we all share the fundamental social and personal difficulties that go with being old, we all know those periods of despair when the pain of aging outweighs everything else.

But, one might ask: What's different here? Isn't there plenty of reason for unhappiness, even despair, at other stages of life? Yes. Ask any adolescent. Life is, in fact, a series of gains and losses, and every beginning foreshadows an ending. But until now, whatever sadness the ending may have generated, whatever sense of loss it brought, was balanced by the promise the beginning held out, the promise of a new adventure, of a time when some part of the world opens up. We move from child to adult and give up the protection and safety of childhood for the privileges of adulthood. The children leave home and we're saddened by the loss of their voices in the house, the sound of their feet on the steps. But we also see freedom ahead, freedom from the many constraints parenthood imposes, an opening up of new possibilities for living. Not a bad exchange for missing their steps on the stair.

What's the trade-off in old age? Yes, we have wisdom, but how often are we called upon to offer it up? Yes, we have time, but for most of us the question is: Time for what? For all the things we couldn't do before, we say. But what happens when we have too much time? No one, perhaps, has answered the question more eloquently than Philip Roth in his moving tale of an aging "everyman": "Suddenly," he writes, "he was lost in nothing, in the sound of the two syllables 'nothing' no less than in the nothingness, lost and drifting, and dread began to seep in."[2] A voice of truth for all the old folks who spend their days listlessly before the TV screen hardly knowing or caring what's playing, grateful for some distraction, for a voice in the house to ease the loneliness and boredom. "TV is the only friend I've got left," an eighty-

nine-year-old woman tells me as she reaches for the remote so we can talk without the background noise.

"So," asks a friend with whom I'd been talking about some of these issues, "is there a time you'd like to go back to?" The answer comes easily, since I already know that, much as I'm troubled by what it means to get old in this society, I don't want to go back to some earlier period. I'm wiser today than I was twenty years ago, and in many ways, more satisfied with who I am, more at ease with myself and my life. I don't want to return to some earlier period and give up what I've gained. I don't ever again want to be too busy to appreciate the small, joyful moments of life. I just wish I could have it all, that I could know what I know today, be who I am now, and live in the world as I did twenty years ago, when it and I still had room for each other, when I didn't have to face the knowledge that the society I live in has little use for me, when I felt *in* the world, an active participant rather than an onlooker. A fantasy I'm certain no old person would reject.

My nostalgic wish to be both who I am now and who I was then must sound anomalous to another's ears, perhaps even implausible, since I'm the one writing this book, an act that in itself puts me in the world. But a single act, a special moment, wonderful and important though it may be, doesn't change the realities of being old in America, doesn't erase the stigma of age—not how society views us, not how we view ourselves.

Yes, I know, age, like beauty, is said to be in the eye of the beholder. But the beholder's eye sees both age and beauty in a cultural context. The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss reports that the Nambikwara Indians have a single word that means "young and beautiful" and another that means "old and ugly."[3] Scarification is the mark of beauty in some cultures; to us a scar is something to hide. Old age may be venerated in some places—at least so long as the old continue to have some use;

we're repelled by it, offended, want to push it out of our sight and our consciousness.

I know, too, that our view of old age depends on where we are in the life cycle. When we were children, old was our thirty-year-old parents and *really* old was our fifty-year-old grandparents. When I turned sixty, it seemed old to me. Now that I'm past eighty and my daughter is closing in on sixty, it's young. But that doesn't change that I know I'm old, even if I also know that if I live to one hundred—not something I long for, to be honest—I'll be older still.

One of the hopeful myths about aging is that you're as old as you feel, meaning that your psychological state, the attitudes you bring to getting old, affect how well or badly you manage it. Or as Satchel Paige, the famous African American baseball player, quipped, "Age is a question of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter."

It's a glib remark, effortlessly tossed off, and like all clichés it holds a core of truth. But it doesn't say much, since I can't think of any issue we might face in life where it's not true. If we tend toward the depressive side, whatever we confront will probably feel worse than it is; if we're of a more sunny disposition, it will almost surely look better.

That said, I must also say: *Age counts*. Not in the fixed and firm way the traditional categories suggest; not in the same way it counted a half century ago. But it counts both in the external world and in the internal one—in the society, in the body, and in the mind.

Socially, old age is still an abomination. Too strong a word? Maybe. But ask yourself when was the last time you looked at someone who's old, maybe who shuffles a bit when he walks, without a shudder, without wanting to look away, without thinking you're glad that's not you. Ask yourself when was the last time

you sought out the company of someone twenty or thirty years older than you are, not as some obligation to your old parents or grandparents, not as a way to soothe your conscience about your negative feelings by spending an hour in an old-age home at Christmas, but because you really like that person and think she has something to say that will interest you.

Friends and colleagues with whom I've talked about the social stigma of aging almost invariably tell me that this is the curse of modern industrial society and wax eloquent about how preindustrial cultures honor and revere their elders. I know the stories; I once believed them myself—and sometimes they're even true. But as with everything else about the subject of aging, the reverence of the old in those societies is only one part of the story. When we look beyond our own nostalgic fantasy for another, better time and place, we find that honor often holds only so long as the old have something to offer, whether as productive members of the community or the repositories of the social and cultural history.

Take their folklore, for example. There we see a view of the old stripped of the romantic haze that has infused many of our own anthropological studies. In an extensive compilation of the folklore of aging ranging across various cultures and several centuries, D. L. Ashliman, professor emeritus of German and folklorist at the University of Pittsburgh, presents an illuminating and vivid tale of the bitterness of old age—a tale of community ambivalence at best, distrust and revulsion at worst—from which few, if any, societies seem to be exempt.

> For most pre-industrial cultures, life's last chapter has been a bitter one. Surviving folklore reflects widespread resignation as to the inevitability of impoverishment, sexual impotence, failing health and vitality, and the loss of family and community sta-

> tus. . . . In spite of the numerous tales and proverbs celebrating the wisdom of old people and promoting their care, folklore is replete with reflections of a basic distrust of age.[4]

Proverbs tell both sides of the story: "He who does not honor age does not deserve age" and "An old man can see backward better than a young one can see forward" stand alongside "Nothing good will come from an old man who still wants to dance" and "Good deeds are wasted on old men and on rogues."

Notice, though, that the positive side refers only to men. When it comes to women, ambivalence recedes behind the belief that they have evil powers and bring bad luck: "If the devil can't come himself, he sends an old woman." "He who walks between two old women early in the morning shall have only bad luck the rest of the day." In these societies, many men, according to Ashliman, would rather let themselves get beaten to death than to pass between two old women.

Caring for old parents was apparently no less a burden in preindustrial societies than in our own. The most widely known story is the Eskimo compact between the old and the young. When it was time for the tribe to move, those who had outlived their usefulness and couldn't keep up the pace set by the young willingly stayed behind to perish in the snow rather than risk the safety of the entire community. But Ashliman presents plenty of other evidence to show that, in the words of one folk saying, "The parent's death is often the children's good fortune," and that neglect, ritual killings, euthanasia, and geronticide were widespread.

From the Greeks to the present time, old age has been met with attitudes ranging from ambivalence to abhorrence. True, the Greeks revered the image of the Homeric sage, but in everyday life, they extolled the glories of youth and beauty, believed it

was a duty to keep "him who is unable to live well from living ill," and often used hemlock to poison those over sixty.[5] Nor is there a shortage in Greek literature of imagery that depicts the old with disgust. Sophocles portrays the aged Oedipus as "disappraised, infirm, unsociable, unfriended, with whom all woe of woe abides."[6] Aristotle speaks of old age as the "demon" that robs men of their physical and moral spirit.

Early Christian tradition, too, has its share of imagery that speaks to the ugliness of the physical and moral decline of the old. "For like elderly men who have no hope of renewing their strength, and expect nothing but their last sleep, so you, weakened by worldly occupations, have given yourselves up to sloth," lectures the Pastor of Hermas.[7] And Augustine, perhaps the most influential theologian in Christendom, writes, "When life draws to a close, the old man is full of complaint, and with no joys... groans abound even unto the decrepitude of old age."[8] As with the Greeks, this dim view isn't the whole story of attitudes toward the old in Christian tradition, but it does represent a strong current that runs through centuries of literature.

Western literature, with its exaggerated reverence for youth, is shot through with references to the beauty of the young compared to the ugliness of the old. Echoing the chorus of those who came before him, the French philosopher Montaigne excoriates the old as filled with "envy, injustice, and malice," and goes on to say: "Age imprints more wrinkles in the mind than it does on the face; and souls are never, or even rarely seen, that in growing old do not smell sour and musty."[9]

What do you feel when you read those words? Do you cringe, think *Not me*, remember the time when you looked at an old person and thought something very much like this, changed your seat on the subway or bus so as not to get too close, as if he had a communicable disease?

In our time we know better than to say such things; it's not

politically correct. But withholding the words doesn't silence the thoughts, any more than banishing "old" from our vocabulary in favor of "senior citizen" has had any substantial impact on either our social or personal attitudes about the old.

In *The Fountain of Age*, Betty Friedan cites a Harris Poll finding that most people over sixty-five resist euphemisms like "senior citizen" or "mature Americans" almost as much as they do terms like "old," "older Americans," and even "retired Americans."[10] Which suggests that they understand all too well that there is currently no language in this society that will reduce the stigma of age and, therefore, none that the old will wear comfortably.

It's not that a change in language isn't helpful in changing perception, just that it can happen only when the new words rest in changed cultural understandings. For language and culture live in reciprocal relationship to each other, and a change in one is likely to bring a shift in the other. So, for example, each change in the way we refer to black Americans—from "colored" to "Negro" to "black" to "African American"—made some difference because it rested on changing cultural norms brought about by decades of struggle that culminated in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. Feminism, too, changed not just the language but the cultural landscape within which women lived and, not least, the public understandings of the very meaning of the word "woman." Until ageism comes under the same kind of public scrutiny with a political movement to match, euphemisms like "senior citizen" will be met with disdain by both the old and the society in which they live.